

15 November 2013

CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING: PREVENTABLE MORTALITY AND MORBIDITY

Dear Colleague

Carbon Monoxide Awareness Week (w/c 18 Nov) is upon us and we believe it is important to remind health professionals to bear in mind the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Carbon monoxide is an odourless, colourless gas that not only kills people every year but causes many more serious injuries. Poisoning by carbon monoxide is almost certainly under-diagnosed. It is likely that many more people are being exposed and suffering the ill effects of exposure than we know about.

Carbon monoxide poisoning can be both an acute life threatening problem and can also present insidiously with difficult to recognise symptoms and signs.

Symptoms

Symptoms of CO poisoning can be vague and unspecific, and include headache, tiredness, nausea, vomiting, vertigo, dizziness, cognitive impairment, long-term neurological damage, convulsions, unconsciousness and death. Chronic low level CO poisoning may be confused with other illnesses such as "influenza" or "food poisoning".

Analysis of data indicates that deaths are most common amongst over 65 year olds, and during winter months. High risk groups at risk of becoming ill as a result of CO exposure include children, pregnant women and their babies, and those with breathing problems or cardiovascular disease.

One of the most common symptoms is a headache, which occurs in 37-85% of cases. It has also been suggested that CO poisoning is identified more often in patients who present to a health professional after midnight or in the early morning and in those who also had syncope.

Advice

Detailed advice on investigations for CO poisoning can be obtained from TOXBASE (www.toxbase.org) or the National Poisons Information Service (NPIS) (telephone 0844 892 0111).

Action needed

Where CO poisoning is identified, it is important that the source of the poisoning is dealt with immediately, especially if the home environment is suspected. If patients are discharged without steps being taken to notify, and collaborate with other agencies to investigate and manage the source, patients may return to environments where exposure can reoccur. As a result, further treatment may be necessary and health consequences may become more serious.

The Chief Medical Officer/Chief Nursing Officer

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For Action

- Doctors and Pharmacists
- NHS Direct
- LHB Chief Executives
- LHB Medical Directors
- LHB Nurse Executive Directors
- Chief Executive Velindre NHS Trust
- Chief Executive Ambulance NHS Trust

For information

- LA Chief Executives
- LA Directors of Public Protection
- WLGA Chief Executive
- PHW Chief Executive

For further information please

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CO poisoning reporting

When patients present to a health professional with a headache, especially after midnight or early in the morning, the possibility of CO poisoning should be considered.

In the event of a case of confirmed or suspected CO poisoning, please notify the Public Health Wales Health Protection Team on 02920 402478, or out of office working hours, the on-call service (via ambulance control).

Further information

Further information, including the management of CO poisoning, is contained within a reference document for health professionals "Carbon Monoxide Poisoning: Needless Deaths, Unnecessary Injury". This document is available on the Welsh Government website:

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/protection/environmental/publications/recognise/?lang=en>

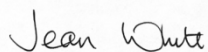
Public Health Wales CO project

Public Health Wales is commencing a project that will aim to describe the epidemiology of CO exposures and associated health outcomes in Wales. This will improve our understanding of hazard-health relationships and variations over time and place, and will also provide useful information to inform future action to prevent CO-related mortality and morbidity.

To ensure this project is successful, your assistance in reporting cases of CO poisoning or other related concerns is important to us.



Dr Ruth Hussey OBE
Chief Medical Officer



Professor Jean White
Chief Nursing Officer