Most of us know that carbon monoxide gas is present in engine exhaust, and we have enough sense not to let an engine run in a closed garage. But safety experts have suspected for years that carbon monoxide contributes to many more vehicle accidents than we’re able to prove.

This insidious gas is colorless, odorless, tasteless and non-irritating. It can kill without ever being detected by the senses. When you smell exhaust fumes, you aren’t smelling the carbon monoxide, you’re smelling unburned hydrocarbons.

Seek Fresh Air

Most people don’t realize how little carbon monoxide it takes to be poisonous to the human body. Only 50 parts of carbon monoxide gas per million parts of air, by volume, is considered dangerous. And there have been cases where that much of the deadly gas has been found in underpasses on city streets.

Carbon monoxide doesn’t suffocate you, it kills you by chemical action. It’s an asphyxiant. It combines directly with the blood in your body so the blood can’t carry oxygen to the tissues. In a sense, you die from oxygen starvation. So, if you have even the least suspicion you’re inhaling too much carbon monoxide, get some fresh air and do not return until the area is considered safe.

Don’t Be a Victim

Here are some points to help keep the silent killer from making you one of its victims.
• Be sure all parts of the manifold, exhaust pipe and muffler are sealed against leaks.
• Keep your engine properly tuned so that combustion will be as complete as possible.
• Before starting your engine, open the garage doors wide or, if you have an exhaust venting system, be sure it's operating.
• Never crawl under your vehicle while the engine is running.

(There are many other good reasons for this, but that's another article.)

• Never drive without a fresh air supply coming into your vehicle. Open the windows or vents.
• Avoid following other vehicles too closely; their exhaust contain carbon monoxide that can be drawn into your vehicle.
• While driving, if you feel a tightness across your forehead, or get a headache or your temples start throbbing, you may be inhaling some carbon monoxide. Other signs while driving at night are that the oncoming lights seem brighter and more glaring than usual and you're slower in recovering your vision from the glare, or that the darkness seems blacker than usual. If you notice any of these signs, stop at once, get out and walk about in the open air, and then drive with the windows open.

Carbon monoxide can slow down your brain and your reflexes, dim your vision and lead you into an accident. During the cooler months, we're more apt to drive with all the windows closed. Always have some fresh air coming in. The oxygen in fresh air is what you need more than anything else to offset the carbon monoxide. CD

About the Author
CNA is a multiline organization that has been in business almost 100 years. An industry leader, the CNA Insurance Companies together make up one of the 10 largest insurance organizations in the industry.

The CNA Insurance Companies underwriting the AWCI-endorsed property casualty business insurance program vary according to coverages. These companies include American Casualty Company of Reading, Pa.; Continental Casualty Company; National Fire Insurance Company of Hartford; Transcontinental Insurance Company; Transportation Insurance Company; and Valley Forge Insurance Company.