

Town Health Officer News

Environmental Health News

Winter 2013

Woodstove Basics

With winter here in Vermont, we are enveloped in small clouds of chimney smoke all across the landscape. The Department of Public Service estimates that between one-third and one-half of the state's households use wood for some or all of their heating needs. While wood burning stoves are an integral part of our heating culture, they can cause significant health consequences — particularly for children, older adults, and people who have diabetes, heart disease, asthma or any other lung disease. (Agency of Natural Resources – Woodstove Facts, <http://www.anr.state.vt.us/air/htm/woodfacts.htm>)

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): “Smoke is made up of a complex mixture of gases and fine particles produced when wood and other organic matter burn. A major health threat from smoke comes from fine particles (also called particle pollution, particulate matter, or PM). These microscopic particles can get into your eyes and respiratory system, where they can cause health problems such as burning eyes, runny nose, and illnesses such as bronchitis.”

As a town health officer, you can help families learn more about how to heat with wood safely:

- Encourage woodstove owners to replace old stoves with an EPA-certified woodstove or other clean burning technology. Certified, cleaner-burning stoves emit 70 percent less particle pollution on average than older, less-efficient stoves or fireplace inserts. They also use approximately 30 percent less wood, which can cut down on costs.
- Make sure wood is dry and seasoned. Burning wet wood creates excessive smoke and doesn't burn as hot. In Vermont, wood should be stacked and seasoned for at least a full year, although in wet years two years might be better. Properly dried wood should have a reading of 20 percent or less.
- Never burn garbage or treated lumber, as this releases harmful chemicals into the air.

For more information visit the EPA's BurnWise website: <http://www.epa.gov/burnwise/>



New Online Lead Law EMP Compliance System

The Health Department has developed a new online service for filing Essential Maintenance Practices (EMP) Compliance Statements. This free system will make it easier for owners and managers of rental housing built before 1978 to file the annual Vermont Lead Law Essential Maintenance Practices (EMP) Compliance Statement for each rental property.

The system also features a publicly accessible 'Search of Compliance Status', which can be used to tell whether a rental property has a current EMP Compliance Statement on file, or if the property is exempt from filing. Note that the system will not have records of EMP compliance statements filed before 2013. Only rental properties with compliance statements that have been filed online will be listed in this system. If you do not find a particular rental address, it means that no compliance statement has been filed online. If you have reason to believe a compliance statement should be filed for a particular property or have questions, contact **EmpCompliance@state.vt.us** or call **(802) 865-7786**. The utility of this online system will only grow as more property owners and managers use it to file and manage their records.

If a property owner or manager has questions about this new system, please provide the link below and inform them that they must have a valid email address to set up an account. Once an account is established, the property owner or manager will be able to file, update and track EMP Compliance Statement filing. To create an account or view the system: <https://secure.vermont.gov/VDH/emp/>

Past Trainings Now Online

If you are a new town health officer and you are looking for some basic trainings, or if you were unable to attend many of the great in-person trainings offered in partnership with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns over the fall, we posted the trainings on our website. You can download the slides for each of the training sessions that were held — *Basic Duties of a Town Health Officer, Inspecting for Indoor Air Quality Issues, Writing Defensible Health Orders, and the Vermont Rental Housing Health Code*: <http://healthvermont.gov/local/tho/tho.aspx>

January is Radon Awareness Month

Radon is a naturally occurring gas that results from the breakdown of uranium in soil and bedrock. Radon is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers in the U.S. The EPA estimates that radon accounts for approximately 20,000 lung cancer deaths every year.

Although Vermont has no laws about radon, it is a very important public health issue, and all houses should be tested for radon. Town health officers can help reduce lung cancer risk by encouraging both homeowners and renters to take advantage of the Health Department's offer of free long-term radon test kits. Last year, 1,800 free long-term radon test kits were distributed to and we have more than 2,500 free kits to distribute this year. In total, over 18,000 houses in Vermont have been tested through this program. Because radon levels can change daily, weekly and seasonally, a long-term test of three to 12 months, including a heating season, best captures a resident's long-term exposure.

"Radon cannot be seen, smelled or tasted, so the only way to know if a house has elevated levels of radon is to test for it," said David Grass, a Health Department epidemiologist. "About 13 percent of houses tested in Vermont have elevated levels of radon."

Radon gas can get into your home from the soil. A house can act like a large chimney, with warm air rising and escaping out upper floor windows and through cracks in the attic. This creates a vacuum at the lowest level of the house, which can pull the radon from the soil into the home. A radon problem cannot be predicted by the style, age or location of a home.

Testing is easy. Just follow the instructions, place the test kit, and then mail it back to the Health Department to get your results when the testing period is over.

Get a free kit by emailing radon@state.vt.us, or call **1-800-439-8550**.

Exposure to high levels of radon is preventable and fixable through proper mitigation techniques. If test results show high levels of radon in the air, a mitigation system can be installed at a cost of approximately \$800 to \$2,000.

For more information about radon, radon testing and mitigation, visit the Health Department website at <http://healthvermont.gov>.

Vermont Department of Health

P.O. Box 70 • 108 Cherry Street • Burlington, VT 05402

Health Officer Hotline:

1-800-439-8550

New Town Health Officer Manual!

The Health Department has updated the Town Health Officer Manual. You can download a new copy at <http://healthvermont.gov/local/tho/documents/TownHealthOfficerManual.pdf>.

The new manual has all the updates to the inspection forms, updated contacts page, as well as revisions to content.

Flu on the Rise in Vermont – Get Vaccinated

Beginning early in January, the Vermont Department of Health reported widespread influenza activity to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with influenza-like illness (the flu) confirmed in all areas of the state. So far, the flu has continued to spread and does not seem to be subsiding any time soon.

“Everyone age 6 months and older should be vaccinated against seasonal flu,” said Patsy Kelso, state epidemiologist for infectious disease. “Flu can be a serious illness, especially for the very young and very old, and a typical season can last well into March.” If you have not been already, you should still get vaccinated. You can also encourage others in your community to get vaccinated as well.

Ask your health care provider for a flu vaccine, or get vaccinated at a local pharmacy. Vaccine is also available, by appointment, at no charge for children up through age 18 at the 12 Health Department district offices.

You should take the following simple precautions to help keep illness from spreading:

- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue and then throw it away.
- Wash your hands often, especially after you cough or sneeze.
- Use alcohol-based hand wipes and gel sanitizers if soap and water are not available.
- Stay home from work or school if you are sick and do not schedule any inspections until 24 hours after you no longer have a fever.
- If possible, avoid or limit contact with individuals you know are sick.

Need Help?

Did you know that the town health officers have an active email list serve? This list serve connects THOs from all over the state and allows the Health Department staff to answer any technical questions quickly. We strongly encourage all town health officers and deputy town health officers to join. It's not only a great resource for you to help each other, but it allows us to send out news, updates and training notices. To have your email added to the list, please contact Marielle Strong at marielle.strong@state.vt.us.

Find us on Facebook & Twitter!

Keep up to speed with the latest news from the Department of Health by going to <http://www.facebook.com/HealthVermont> and <http://twitter.com/healthvermont>.

Most of our district offices have Facebook pages with local information. Find your local office at http://healthvermont.gov/interactive_media.aspx.

Health Department Local Offices

<i>Barre</i> 479-4200	<i>Middlebury</i> 388-4644	<i>St. Albans</i> 524-7970
<i>Bennington</i> 447-3531	<i>Morrisville</i> 888-7447	<i>St. Johnsbury</i> 748-5151
<i>Brattleboro</i> 257-2880	<i>Newport</i> 334-6707	<i>Springfield</i> 885-5778
<i>Burlington</i> 863-7323	<i>Rutland</i> 786-5811	<i>White River Jct.</i> 295-8820

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Reminders to Prevent Exposure to Carbon Monoxide (CO)

Each year, 30 to 50 Vermonters are exposed to carbon monoxide, an odorless, colorless, tasteless gas that can be deadly during the home heating season.

“Carbon monoxide poisoning is the leading cause of poison-related death in the United States, and it is preventable.” said Sarah Vose, state toxicologist for the Vermont Department of Health. “A properly functioning carbon monoxide detector near all sleeping areas is the best protection.”

Combustion fumes from portable generators, wood-burning stoves, gas ranges and heating systems can lead to a potentially fatal build up of carbon monoxide in places that don't have a good flow of fresh air, or if heating systems are not maintained or vented properly, such as a vent that is blocked by snow.

Sixty-four percent of unintentional poisonings from carbon monoxide occur in the home.

“If your CO detector is going off and wakes you up, or during the day call 9-1-1 and leave the house immediately,” said Chris Herrick, chief of the Vermont HAZMAT Response Team. “Even though you may not see or smell anything the situation could be dangerous or even deadly.”

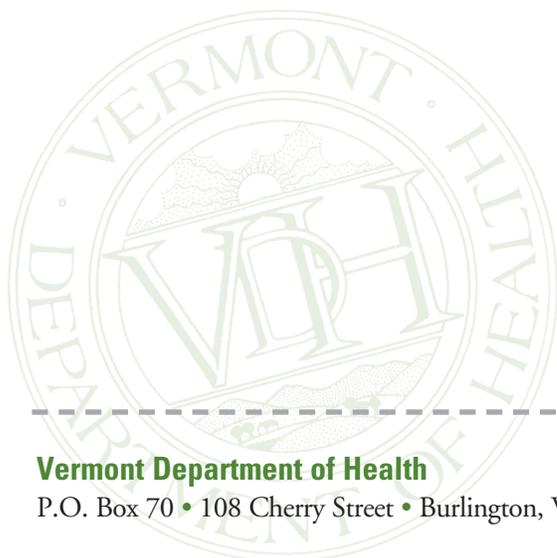
Symptoms can be mild (fatigue, headache, dizziness, nausea) or severe (loss of consciousness and death) and the level of exposure, such as how long and how much was inhaled, influences the recovery and the damage done. Most people who survive CO poisoning recover fully. Some, however, may have delayed symptoms. Mental abilities can be impaired and permanent brain damage can occur.

When inspecting rental properties, always make sure there are working CO detectors. Advise property owners to:

- Properly install a carbon monoxide detector near all sleeping areas in the home.

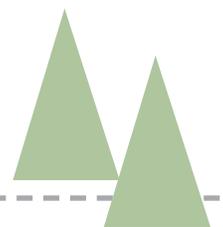
- Remind tenants that if the detector alarm sounds, they should leave immediately and call 9-1-1.
- Maintain heating equipment, gas, oil, or, coal burning appliances and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected annually by a qualified professional.
- Have any wood stove, chimney, and venting system that is used by tenants cleaned and inspected annually by a qualified professional at least once a year.
- Make sure that stove pipes and other types of vents are tightly joined and not cracked or rusty.
- Encourage tenants to seek prompt medical attention if they suspect carbon monoxide poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed, or nauseous.
- Keep snow or ice from piling up outside a vent for a fuel-burning appliance.
- Never allow the use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove, or other gasoline or charcoal burning device inside the home, basement, or garage, near a window, or under a tent.
- Never allow the use a gas cooking range or oven to heat the unit.
- Never allow anyone to run a car or truck inside a garage attached to the living structures, even if the door is left open.
- Do not allow tenants to burn anything in a stove or fireplace that is not vented or may be clogged.

CO alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. THO's should familiarize themselves with the difference between the sound of smoke alarms and the sound of CO alarms.



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