



An Extended Guide · No. 1638

If You Smell Gas: Leak Detection and What to Do

Smell gas? Leave first, then call

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! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a generator indoors, in a garage, in a shed, or on a porch, not even with the door open and a fan going. Run it outside only, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on each floor and outside the bedrooms. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. Whether it's propane or natural gas, the smell is your early-warning system, and the correct response is always the same: leave the area first, and only call for help once you are safely away — never investigate a leak yourself.

Let's talk about what to do if you smell gas

A gas leak is genuinely serious, and it's also genuinely simple to respond to correctly. This guide is short on purpose: there's one main rule, a few things never to do, and a handful of signs worth knowing. Read it once, calmly, and you'll know exactly what to do if the moment ever comes.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. This is one of the most important guides in this whole set, because getting this response right, without hesitation, is what keeps you and your family safe.

This guide covers both propane and natural gas, since the warning sign and the response are almost identical for each. Where they differ — like which way the gas travels once it escapes — I'll point it out.

! The one rule that matters most

If you smell gas, leave first, then call. Don't flip a switch, light anything, or go looking for the source. Get everyone to fresh air and a safe distance, then call for help. Everything else in this guide supports that one rule.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you'll respond correctly to a gas leak every time.

- ❑ The rotten-egg smell added to propane and natural gas is your early warning — trust it.
- ❑ If you smell gas: leave first. Don't flip switches, light anything, or use a phone indoors.
- ❑ Get everyone to a safe distance outdoors, away from the house.
- ❑ Then call: 911 and/or your gas utility (natural gas) or your propane dealer (propane).
- ❑ Don't go back inside until you're told it's safe.
- ❑ A gas leak is different from carbon monoxide — both are serious, and both deserve their own attention.

✓ This guide is short on purpose

When it matters, you want a rule you can recall instantly, not a long checklist. Leave first, then call is the whole idea.

The smell is your early-warning system

Both propane and natural gas are naturally close to odorless, so an odorant is added on purpose.

The distinctive rotten-egg smell you associate with gas isn't the fuel itself — it's a scent deliberately added so that a leak announces itself long before it becomes dangerous. It's one of the simplest, most effective safety features around fuel gas, and it works because your nose is remarkably good at detecting it.

That means you don't need any special training to catch a leak early. You just need to know what the smell means, and to act on it the moment you notice it, whether it's faint or strong.

✓ A faint smell deserves the same response

Don't wait to see if it gets worse. The correct response doesn't change based on intensity — leave, then call, every time.

The golden rule: leave first, then call

If you take away only one idea from this entire guide, make it this one.

The moment you notice the smell of gas, stop what you're doing and get everyone — people and pets — out of the house or area and to a safe distance outdoors. Do this before anything else, including trying to find the source.

- Leave calmly but promptly — there's no need to grab belongings.
- Get well away from the house, not just out the front door.
- Once you're at a safe distance, call for help.
- Don't return until you're told it's safe to do so.

! Leave first, then call — always in that order

Calling from inside the house, or lingering to investigate, defeats the purpose of leaving. Get safe, then get help.

What not to do

A few ordinary actions become genuinely dangerous the moment gas is in the air.

- **Don't flip a light switch**, on or off — even that small spark can be enough.
- **Don't light a match, a lighter, or a pilot light.**
- **Don't use a phone or doorbell inside the house** — step outside first, then call.
- **Don't start a car in an attached garage** where you suspect a leak.
- **Don't try to find or fix the source yourself.**

! Any spark is one spark too many

None of these actions seems dangerous in everyday life. Near a gas leak, any one of them can be the difference between a close call and a disaster. When in doubt, treat everything as a potential spark.

Who to call, and from where

Once you're safely away from the house, it's time to call for help.

Call 911. If the leak involves your home's natural gas line, also call your gas utility's emergency number — they treat these calls urgently, any time of day. If the leak involves a propane tank or cylinder, call your propane dealer as well.

Make these calls from a safe distance, using a phone that's already outside with you, or a neighbor's phone. Give a calm, clear description of what you smelled and where, and follow whatever instructions you're given.

✓ Keep these numbers somewhere you'd find them

Store your gas utility's and your propane dealer's numbers in your phone and on paper somewhere handy. A calm moment now saves fumbling later.

Other signs of a leak

Smell is the main signal, but a few other clues are worth knowing too.

- A hissing sound near a gas line, meter, tank, valve, or appliance connection.
- Unusually dead, discolored, or dying vegetation in an otherwise healthy area, especially near a buried line.
- Bubbling in a wet or puddled area near a gas line, with no obvious other cause.
- A general uneasy feeling in a room that goes away once you're outside, even without a strong smell.

Any one of these, on its own, is worth taking seriously. You don't need the smell to also be present to justify leaving and calling.

✓ Trust the pattern, not just the nose

If something seems off near where you know gas lines or tanks run, it's worth a call even without a strong smell. False alarms cost you a few minutes; ignored leaks cost far more.

Propane sinks, natural gas rises

This one fact helps you understand where a leak might gather, even though the response is identical either way.

Propane is heavier than air, so if it escapes, it tends to sink and pool low — along the floor, in a basement, or in a crawl space. Natural gas is lighter than air, so it tends to rise and disperse upward and outward. Our natural gas basics guide covers this comparison in a bit more depth.

	Propane	Natural gas
Weight vs. air	Heavier	Lighter
Tends to	Sink, pool low	Rise, disperse
Check low spots	Especially important	Less critical

✓ **Useful to know, but doesn't change the plan**

Whichever fuel it is and wherever it might be pooling, the response is exactly the same: leave the area, then call. This is background, not a substitute for that rule.

The soapy-water test: when it's fine, and when it's not

There's one simple check homeowners can safely do themselves — but only under the right conditions.

Mixing a little dish soap with water and brushing it over a gas connection — a fitting, a hose, a valve — will show a leak as growing bubbles. It's a genuinely useful way to check a specific connection you're curious about.

This test is only appropriate when there is no active strong smell of gas and the situation otherwise feels safe. If you already smell gas strongly, skip this test entirely and go straight to leaving the house and calling — this is a check for a quiet, curious moment, not a response to an active leak.

! Never test with a flame

Never use a lighter, a match, or any flame to 'check' for a gas leak. The only safe check is soap and water, and only when there's no strong smell already present.

Gas detectors as an extra layer

Your nose is a good first line of defense, but a detector adds a second one.

A gas detector or combination alarm can supplement your own sense of smell, especially useful for anyone with a reduced sense of smell or a harder-to-notice area of the house. They're not a replacement for knowing the smell and the response — think of them as a helpful backup, not the whole plan.

Whatever detector you choose, follow the manufacturer's instructions for placement and testing. This is a good topic to ask about on a visit if you're not sure your home has adequate coverage.

★ Happy to help you think through coverage

If you're wondering whether your home has the right alarms in the right places, that's exactly the kind of walk-through I'm glad to do with you. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Where you live shapes some of the details — who you'd call, how far help is, and what's nearby — but never the core response.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or a close-in suburb, help is usually close by, and neighbors mean an extra set of eyes and ears.

- 911 and utility response are often quicker in town, but the leave-first-then-call sequence never changes.
- If you smell gas and you're unsure it's coming from your own home, it's still worth calling — a leak can affect more than one property.
- Closer neighbors mean it's worth warning them too if you're stepping away from a serious leak.
- Keep your gas utility's number handy even if you rarely think about it day to day.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, help may be a longer drive away, and you may be managing your own propane tank rather than a utility connection.

- Leave and call anyway, even if you know help will take longer to arrive — distance from the house is what keeps you safe in the meantime.
- If it's a propane tank, your dealer is a key call alongside 911.
- Rural properties often have more outbuildings and buried lines — know roughly where yours run.
- A charged phone and a family meeting spot away from the house are worth deciding on in advance.

★ Let's make sure your plan is solid

Tell me about your setup — propane, natural gas, or both — and I'll help you make sure you know who to call and where to go. Call (330) 200-8042.

A gas leak is different from carbon monoxide

These two dangers get confused, and it's worth being clear about the difference.

A gas leak is unburned propane or natural gas escaping before it's ever used — you can often smell it because of the added odorant, and the danger is fire or explosion. Carbon monoxide is a byproduct of burning fuel, produced by an engine or appliance that's running, and it's invisible and odorless — you cannot smell it at all. Our carbon monoxide guide covers that danger and the alarms that catch it.

Both deserve alarms in your home: a gas leak might be caught by smell or a gas detector, while carbon monoxide needs a dedicated CO alarm, since your nose cannot detect it. Having both kinds of protection covers both dangers.

! Two dangers, two responses

For a gas smell: leave first, then call. For a CO alarm or CO symptoms like dizziness or sleepiness: get to fresh air first, then call. Knowing which one you're dealing with helps, but when in doubt, get outside either way.

If it's a propane cylinder or tank

A few specifics for anyone whose gas comes from a cylinder or tank rather than a utility line.

If you smell gas near a propane cylinder or tank, leave the area the same way you would for any leak, and once you're safe, call your propane dealer along with 911. If it's practical and safe to do without lingering, and the valve is easily reached, turning off the cylinder or tank valve on your way out can help — but never delay your own exit to do this, and never go back in for it.

Our guide on storing propane cylinders safely covers the everyday habits that help prevent a leak in the first place, like keeping cylinders upright, outdoors, and in good condition.

✓ When in doubt, just leave

If turning a valve means pausing even a few extra seconds near a suspected leak, skip it. Getting yourself to safety always comes first.

If it's your home's natural gas line

A few specifics for a leak involving your home's piped gas.

If you smell gas and suspect it's coming from your home's natural gas line or an appliance connected to it, leave the same way you would for any leak, and call your gas utility's emergency number along with 911 once you're at a safe distance.

Our natural gas basics guide covers how gas gets to your home and why the utility is a resource worth knowing before you ever need them in an emergency. If you know where your home's main gas shutoff is, and it's safe and quick to reach on your way out, a licensed pro or your utility can show you how to use it — but again, don't delay leaving to find it.

✓ Knowing your shutoff is a calm-day project

This is exactly the kind of thing worth learning on an ordinary afternoon, not while you're worried about a leak. Ask your utility or a pro to show you.

After you've called: what happens next

Once you've made the call, your job is mostly just to wait safely.

Emergency responders and utility crews are trained to handle gas leaks and will typically ask you to stay well away from the house until they've checked it out. Answer their questions as clearly as you can — what you smelled, when, and roughly where.

This can feel like a long wait when you're standing outside, but it's the safest place for you to be. Let the professionals confirm the situation before anyone goes back inside.

✓ Patience here is part of the safety plan

It's normal to want to go back and check on things. Resist that urge until you're told it's genuinely safe.

When it's safe to go back

Don't return until someone qualified tells you it's safe — not when the smell seems to fade, and not on your own judgment.

Gas can dissipate to where you no longer smell it while still posing a risk, especially in an enclosed space. Wait for a clear all-clear from the utility, propane dealer, or emergency responders before going back inside or resuming normal activity.

Once you're cleared to return, it's worth a follow-up conversation with a licensed pro about anything that may need repair, especially if the leak was traced to a line, connection, or appliance.

! No smell doesn't always mean no risk

Don't let a fading smell talk you into going back early. Wait for someone qualified to confirm it's actually safe.

Common mistakes people make

A handful of avoidable reactions turn a manageable situation into a dangerous one.

- **Investigating the smell yourself** instead of leaving right away.
- **Flipping a light switch** on the way out of a dark room.
- **Calling from inside the house** instead of stepping outside first.
- **Going back in too soon** because the smell seemed to fade.
- **Testing a connection with a flame** instead of soap and water.
- **Confusing a gas leak with a carbon monoxide alarm** and responding the wrong way.

! Any one of these can turn serious fast

None of these mistakes feels dramatic in the moment. Near a real leak, several of them are exactly how a bad situation becomes a tragedy. Leave first, then call — every time.

Questions worth asking

Whether you're talking to your utility, your propane dealer, or me, these get you real answers.

Q: What if I'm not sure it's actually gas I'm smelling?

Treat it as a leak anyway. Leave, then call. It costs a few minutes to have someone confirm it's nothing — ignoring a real leak costs far more.

Q: Should I open windows on my way out?

Don't stop to do this. Getting yourself and your family out safely comes first; let responders handle ventilating the space.

Q: Is the soapy-water test safe if I already smell gas?

No. That test is only for a quiet check with no active strong smell. If you smell gas now, skip it and leave.

Q: How is a gas leak different from a carbon monoxide alarm going off?

A gas leak you can often smell; carbon monoxide you cannot. Both mean getting to fresh air, but see our carbon monoxide guide for that alarm's specific response.

✓ There's no silly question

Gas safety can feel intimidating, but the response is simple once you know it. Ask until you're confident — that's exactly how you stay safe.

Preventing leaks in the first place

Knowing the response matters, but a little prevention goes a long way too.

Most leaks trace back to a handful of preventable causes: a cylinder or tank that's damaged or improperly stored, a connection that was never professionally installed or inspected, or equipment that's aged past its safe working life. Our guides on storing propane cylinders safely and on connecting to a home propane supply cover the habits that help avoid these in the first place.

Routine attention matters too — keep an eye on visible connections and fittings, and don't hesitate to have a licensed pro take a look if anything seems off, even if you're not sure it rises to the level of an emergency.

✓ An ounce of prevention, here more than most

Good storage habits and professional installation prevent the vast majority of leaks before they start. This whole guide is your backup plan, not your first line of defense.

Common Questions

The leak-detection questions I hear most often, answered plainly.

Q: What's the very first thing I should do if I smell gas?

Leave. Get yourself and everyone else out of the house and to a safe distance outdoors, without flipping switches, lighting anything, or stopping to investigate.

Q: Who do I call once I'm safe?

Call 911, and also your gas utility if it's natural gas, or your propane dealer if it's a propane tank or cylinder. Do this from a safe distance, not from inside the house.

Q: Is a faint smell less urgent than a strong one?

No — treat both the same way. The correct response, leave first then call, doesn't change based on how strong the smell is.

Q: Can I test a suspected leak with a lighter to see if there's gas?

Never. That is exactly the spark this whole guide is warning you about. The only safe self-check is soap and water, and only when there's no active strong smell.

★ Still have a question on your mind?

That's what I'm here for. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll give you a plain, honest answer, and help you make sure your household knows the plan.

How this fits with the rest

Leak detection is the safety net — these other guides help you need it less often.

This guide covered what to do if you ever smell gas: leave first, then call. For the everyday habits that help prevent a leak, see our guides on storing propane cylinders safely and on connecting to a home propane supply. Our natural gas basics guide explains more about how piped gas behaves and reaches your home.

And because a gas leak and carbon monoxide are two different dangers that both deserve real respect, keep our carbon monoxide guide close as well — between the two, you've got the fuel-safety basics well covered.

★ One call covers all of it

You don't have to sort out which guide answers which question. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, describe your setup, and I'll help make sure you and your family know the plan.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made knowing what to do if you ever smell gas feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

If You Smell Gas: What to Do

One sequence, no exceptions



Leave first, then call -- in that order, every time.

Propane vs. Natural Gas: Where a Leak Collects

Different behavior, identical response

	Propane	Natural gas
Weight vs. air	Heavier	Lighter
Tends to	Sink, pool low	Rise, disperse
Who to call	Your dealer	Your utility
Response	Leave, then call	Leave, then call

The response is identical either way -- only the destination differs.

Gas Leak vs. Carbon Monoxide

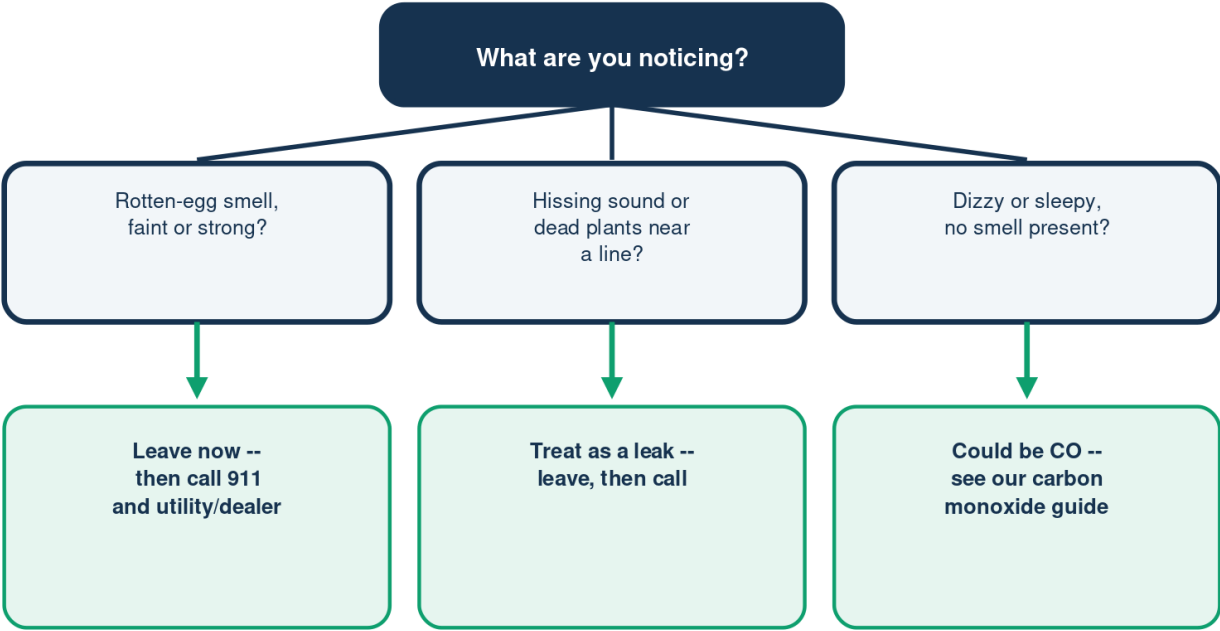
Two different dangers, both deserve respect

	Gas leak	Carbon monoxide
Can you smell it	Yes, by design	No, odorless
Source	Unburned fuel	Burning fuel
Danger	Fire, explosion	Poisoning
Your response	Leave, then call	Fresh air, then call

Different dangers, similar urgency -- get outside either way.

What Do You Smell or Notice?

A quick gut-check for an uncertain moment



When in doubt, get everyone outside first and sort it out from there.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.



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— Bill

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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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