



An Extended Guide · No. 1643

How Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Happens

The warning signs,
and exactly what to do

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

BillsHomeTech.com · (330) 200-8042 · Atwater, Ohio

Free & printable — share it with someone who needs it



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

! 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. This guide is about spotting carbon monoxide early — because it gives you no natural warning of its own, and knowing the signs yourself is what buys you the time to act.

Learning to read the warning signs

Carbon monoxide is dangerous for one reason above all others: it slips up on you. It has no color, no smell, and no taste, so the only early warning you get is what your own body starts to feel — and this guide is about learning to notice that in time.

I'm Bill. For 30-plus years I've helped folks around Portage County set up and understand the gear in their homes, and generators are a big part of that. This particular guide isn't about where the generator goes — that's our guide on carbon monoxide safety and the 20-foot rule. This one is about what happens if carbon monoxide ever does reach the people you love, and exactly what to do about it.

My hope is that you never need the emergency steps in here. But carbon monoxide is one of those rare dangers where knowing the signs ahead of time, calmly, on an ordinary day, is what makes the difference when it counts. So let's walk through it together, slowly and plainly.

★ You don't have to memorize all of it

The heart of this guide is short — know the symptoms, get everyone to fresh air, then call 911 — and everything else just fills that in. If you'd like a hand thinking through your own home and who lives in it, that's exactly the kind of visit I'm glad to make. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

The 60-second version

If you read nothing else in this guide, read this page.

- ❑ Carbon monoxide (CO) is invisible and odorless, so your body's symptoms are your only early warning.
- ❑ The early signs are easy to miss — headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, and a sudden heavy sleepiness.
- ❑ They mimic the flu or plain tiredness, which is exactly what makes CO so easy to explain away.
- ❑ More than one person — or a pet — feeling the same vague symptoms at once is a serious red flag.
- ❑ If you suspect it: get everyone and every pet to fresh air first, then call 911 from outside, and don't go back in.
- ❑ Get a medical check even if the symptoms fade once you are outside.

! This page is worth reading twice

Everything else in this guide expands on these six lines. If you remember only the shape of them, you'll know when something is wrong and what to do about it.

What carbon monoxide is, and why you can't sense it

To recognize the danger, it helps to understand the plain facts of what carbon monoxide is — and why your senses are no help at all.

Carbon monoxide, often written CO, is a gas made whenever a fuel like gasoline, propane, natural gas, wood, or charcoal burns. A generator's engine burns fuel the whole time it runs, so it produces carbon monoxide the whole time too, as part of its exhaust.

Here is the cruel part: carbon monoxide has no color, no smell, and no taste. A natural-gas leak is given a rotten-egg odor on purpose so you'll notice it — carbon monoxide has nothing like that. You cannot see it drifting, you cannot smell it building, and you cannot taste it in the air. It can fill a room while everything looks and feels perfectly normal.

That's why the rest of this guide leans so hard on two things: the symptoms your body feels, and an alarm on the wall. Between them, they are the only real warning you get — because the gas itself will never announce itself.

! Your nose will not save you

Please don't count on smelling trouble. Many folks assume they'd notice something in the air, but there is simply nothing to notice. The warning has to come from symptoms or an alarm, never from your senses alone.

How carbon monoxide harms the body

You don't need the deep science to stay safe, but a plain picture of what's happening makes every symptom and every rule make sense.

Your blood carries oxygen from your lungs to the rest of you — your brain, your heart, your muscles. When you breathe in carbon monoxide, it takes up the space in your blood that oxygen is supposed to use, and it holds on far more stubbornly than oxygen does. Little by little, your blood carries less and less oxygen to where it's needed.

Because your brain and heart are the hungriest for oxygen, they are the first to complain. That's why the early signs are a headache, dizziness, and muddled thinking — your brain is being shortchanged. Left to continue, it moves from uncomfortable to dangerous, because the body simply cannot run for long on too little oxygen.

The important takeaway is this: carbon monoxide does its harm quietly and from the inside, while you may still feel only a little off. It is not like touching a hot stove, where the pain tells you to stop at once. It's gentler and slower at the start, and that's exactly what makes it so dangerous.

✓ Why the symptoms are worth knowing cold

Since the gas hides and the harm builds quietly, the symptoms are your body doing the warning for you. Knowing them by heart means you can act on the first one, instead of waiting until it's obvious.

Why a running engine near a home is the real danger

Carbon monoxide is only a threat when something is making it near where you breathe. During an outage, that something is very often the generator.

A generator's engine runs continuously — for hours, often overnight, and often with nobody watching it. That's very different from a car that idles for a moment. Hour after hour it puts out carbon monoxide, and if it's too close to the house or tucked in a garage or shed, that gas has time to find its way indoors and build up.

In an enclosed or partly enclosed space — a garage, a shed, a basement, a closed-up house with the generator right outside a window — carbon monoxide can climb to dangerous, even deadly, levels within minutes. Not hours. Minutes. That speed is the whole reason the response later in this guide is so quick and so firm.

The deeper how-and-where of placement lives in our guide on carbon monoxide safety and the 20-foot rule. For this guide, the point is simply this: the danger is highest when an engine runs for a long time close to where people are breathing, especially while they sleep.

! Minutes, not hours

In a closed space there may be very little time between the first faint symptom and real danger. That's why 'let me just finish what I'm doing' is never worth it — when CO is suspected, the clock is not on your side.

The full symptom picture

Here are the signs to know by heart. Any of them, while a generator or other engine is running nearby, deserves your full attention.

- Headache — very often the first sign of all
- Dizziness or feeling light-headed
- Weakness or unusual tiredness
- Nausea or an upset stomach
- Shortness of breath, especially when moving around
- Confusion or trouble thinking clearly
- Blurred vision
- Sleepiness, especially if it comes on suddenly

Notice how ordinary most of these sound on their own. A headache and a wave of tiredness on a stormy evening are the easiest things in the world to shrug off. That's the trap. What turns them from ordinary into a warning is the setting — a generator or other engine running nearby, and often more than one person feeling it.

✓ It's the pattern, not one symptom

Any single symptom can be a hundred harmless things. But a cluster of them, coming on together while an engine runs, points one direction. Trust the pattern and get to fresh air.

From a mild headache to real danger

Carbon monoxide symptoms tend to build in a rough order, and seeing that order laid out helps you catch it early rather than late.

Early on, it starts small and vague — a dull headache, feeling a bit dizzy or queasy, a tiredness that doesn't quite fit the day. This is the stage where it's easiest to act and, sadly, easiest to ignore. Acting here, on nothing more than a hunch, is exactly what you want to do.

As it worsens, thinking gets cloudy and confused, the weakness deepens, vomiting can set in, and a heavy sleepiness takes hold. Confusion makes it hard to realize you need to leave, and sleepiness can pull someone under before they act — which is a large part of why carbon monoxide is so deadly overnight.

At the serious stage, it can lead to fainting or collapse and loss of consciousness. Someone this far along may not be able to help themselves at all, so anyone still clear-headed has to act for everyone — get them out and call 911.

! Don't wait for the next stage

The whole point of knowing the order is to step in at the headache, not at the collapse. You never have to be certain — catching it early and being wrong costs you nothing but a little fresh air.

Why it fools people into thinking it's the flu

The single most dangerous thing about carbon monoxide symptoms is how ordinary they seem. Here's how to tell the difference.

A headache, tiredness, nausea, feeling foggy — put those together and most of us would say 'I'm coming down with something.' That instinct, to rest it off and wait to feel better, is the exact wrong move if it's carbon monoxide, because resting in place means breathing more of it.

- **No fever.** Carbon monoxide doesn't cause a fever the way the flu usually does.
- **Several people at once.** A whole household feeling ill together, at the same time, is a strong tell.
- **Pets are sick too.** Animals often show it before people do.
- **You feel better outside.** If symptoms ease when you leave the house and return when you go back in, treat that as CO until proven otherwise.
- **It lines up with a running engine.** Symptoms that start after the generator does are a warning, not a coincidence.

! When in doubt, step outside and see

If you can't tell whether it's a bug or something worse, step outside into fresh air for a while. Feeling noticeably better in the open air is a clue you should not brush aside — get everyone out and call for help.

The biggest red flag: more than one at once

If you take one diagnostic clue from this whole guide, make it this one.

Illnesses like a cold or the flu usually move through a household one person at a time, over days. Carbon monoxide doesn't work that way. It affects everyone breathing the same air together, so several people — and pets — tend to feel the same vague symptoms at roughly the same time.

So if two or more people in the house suddenly have headaches, or feel dizzy or sick or unusually sleepy at once — especially with a generator or other engine running — do not stop to puzzle over it. That pattern alone is reason enough to get everyone outside and call 911. A pet acting sick or sluggish at the same time makes it more urgent still.

! Same air, same symptoms

Several people feeling off together is one of the clearest signs carbon monoxide gives you. Whatever else it might be, it earns an immediate trip to fresh air first — you can sort out the cause once everyone is safe.

Exactly what to do if you suspect it

This is the page to know cold. If carbon monoxide is a real possibility, this is the order of operations — no hesitating, no detours.

- ❑ Get everyone — and every pet — outside into fresh air right away. Don't stop to open windows, find the cause, or gather belongings.
- ❑ Once you're outside, call 911 and tell them you think it may be carbon monoxide, and whether anyone is very sick.
- ❑ If a generator or engine is running and you can reach its switch safely from outside, shut it off — but never go back indoors to do it.
- ❑ Do not go back inside for any reason until emergency responders say it's safe — not for a phone, a pet, or a purse.
- ❑ If someone has collapsed, won't wake up, or is struggling to breathe, say that plainly to the dispatcher so they send the right help.

! Fresh air first, questions later

You will never regret a false alarm that turned out to be nothing. You may deeply regret waiting to be sure. Out into the open air first, every single time — then let the professionals check the house.

Get a medical check, even if you feel better

Feeling better in the fresh air is a relief — and it's also exactly why people skip the medical check they still need.

Once you're out in fresh air, symptoms often ease, and it's tempting to decide it was nothing and carry on. But carbon monoxide can have effects that linger or show up later, and only a medical professional can check how much reached the blood. Feeling better outside does not mean the exposure did no harm.

- ❑ Let the 911 responders check everyone over, and follow their advice about going to the emergency room.
- ❑ Get anyone who felt symptoms looked at — especially children, older adults, anyone pregnant, and anyone with a heart or lung condition.
- ❑ Mention every symptom, even ones that have passed, and how long the exposure lasted if you know.
- ❑ Before anyone settles back in indoors, have the cause found and fixed so it can't happen again.

✓ Better safe, every time

A check-up that turns out fine is a wonderful outcome, not a wasted trip. With carbon monoxide, being cautious after the fact is simply good sense.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Where you live changes how fast help can reach you and whose air you share — so it shapes how much your own quick action matters.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, homes sit close together and are often attached, which means carbon monoxide from one home's generator can affect a neighbor's — and the other way around too.

- Attached walls and shared air mean CO can drift between homes — your symptoms could come from a neighbor's generator, not your own.
- If you feel the signs, still get out and call 911 — then it helps to let neighbors know so they can check their own homes.
- Emergency help is usually only minutes away in town, but that's still long enough for CO to do harm — the fresh-air step always comes first.
- Close quarters make a working CO alarm in every home matter for the whole block, not just one house.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, your nearest neighbor and the nearest ambulance are both farther away — so the minutes you save by acting early matter even more.

- A longer drive for EMS means your own first steps — fresh air, then 911 — carry more of the load until help arrives.
- Rural outages tend to run longer, so the generator runs unattended overnight for days, which is exactly when symptoms can build unnoticed while everyone sleeps.
- With help farther off, working CO alarms on every level are not a nicety — they may be what wakes the house in time.
- Tell a family member or close neighbor your plan, so someone else knows to check on you during a long outage.

★ Let's tailor this to your home

Whether you're on a close in-town lot or a place down a long country road, I'm glad to help you think through alarms, symptoms, and a plan everyone understands. Call (330) 200-8042.

Who carbon monoxide harms fastest

Carbon monoxide is dangerous to everyone, but some people — and pets — feel it sooner and more severely.

Infants and young children, older adults, anyone who is pregnant, and anyone living with a heart or lung condition can be affected faster and harder than a healthy adult. If your household includes anyone in these groups, it's worth being especially quick to act on the first symptom.

Pets matter here too, in two ways: they are vulnerable, and they often show distress before people notice anything. A dog or cat suddenly sluggish, unsteady, or sick while a generator runs is a warning worth heeding for the whole household.

For older adults especially, the early signs — a headache, feeling tired, feeling a little foggy — are easy to write off as an ordinary bad day. If a generator or engine is running nearby, I'd far rather you check a symptom that turns out to be nothing than explain away one that wasn't.

★ This is exactly why I ask

When I help with a generator, I ask a little about who lives in the home — not to pry, but because the alarm plan and the safety habits are worth getting extra right when someone more vulnerable is under the roof. No judgment, ever — just care.

Other carbon monoxide sources during an outage

A generator is the big one this category is about, but an outage tends to bring out other fuel-burning things — and the same danger and the same symptoms apply to all of them.

- **Charcoal or gas grills** used indoors or in a garage 'just to cook something quick' — a leading cause of CO poisoning during outages.
- **Camp stoves and propane or kerosene heaters** not rated for indoor use, brought inside for warmth.
- **A car left running in an attached garage** to charge a phone or warm up — door open or not, the exhaust drifts into the house.
- **A gas furnace, water heater, or fireplace** with a vent blocked by snow or debris.

The reason this matters for a symptoms guide is simple: if someone in the house feels the signs, the generator isn't the only suspect. The response is the same no matter the source — fresh air, then 911 — and one good set of CO alarms guards against every one of these at once.

! One alarm plan covers them all

This is a big reason whole-home carbon monoxide alarms matter beyond generator season — they're watching for every fuel-burning risk under your roof, not just the one in this guide. Our CO-alarms guide covers exactly how to set that up.

How this fits with placement and alarms

Knowing the symptoms is the last layer of safety, not the first. It works alongside two others, each with its own guide in this category.

The first layer is placement: running the generator outdoors only, well away from the house — the safety agencies advise at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Done right, that keeps carbon monoxide from ever reaching you in the first place. The full how-to is in our guide on carbon monoxide safety and the 20-foot rule.

The second layer is alarms: battery or battery-backup carbon monoxide alarms on every level and outside every sleeping area, so a machine warns you even while you sleep. Our CO-alarms guide walks through choosing and placing them. This guide is the third layer — your own eyes and body — for the moment the first two are tested.

✓ Three layers, working together

Placement keeps the gas away. Alarms warn you if it drifts close. Knowing the symptoms means you catch what slips past both. No single layer is meant to carry the whole job alone — together, they keep your family safe.

Building your family's CO-response plan

A few calm minutes now means nobody has to think hard in the moment it matters most.

- ❑ Everyone in the house knows the main symptoms — headache, dizziness, nausea, confusion, and sudden sleepiness.
- ❑ Everyone knows the rule by heart: fresh air first, then call 911 from outside.
- ❑ There's an agreed spot to gather outdoors, well away from the house, so you can count heads.
- ❑ Everyone knows not to go back inside until responders say it's safe.
- ❑ Anyone hard of hearing has a way to be alerted by the CO alarm — our CO-alarms guide covers the options.

✓ Walk it through once, calmly

Talk it over with your household on an ordinary day, not during a real outage. Say the symptoms out loud, point to the door, name the meeting spot. Five calm minutes now beats a frightened scramble later.

Myths people believe — and the truth

A few mistaken beliefs about the symptoms come up again and again. Here's the honest version of each.

Myth	Fact
'I'd smell it if it were CO.'	It has no smell at all. Symptoms or an alarm are your only warning.
'I'd know it wasn't just the flu.'	The signs mimic flu and tiredness closely — that's what makes it dangerous.
'If I felt bad I'd just lie down.'	Resting in place means breathing more CO. Get to fresh air instead.
'I feel fine now, so it was nothing.'	Symptoms fade in fresh air even when exposure did harm. Still get checked.
'Only the generator can cause it.'	Grills, heaters, and a car in the garage make CO too. Same response.

! A belief doesn't have to be true to feel true

Every myth above sounds reasonable, which is exactly why they persist. When something you've heard doesn't match this guide, trust the rule, not the rumor.

Questions worth asking

A few plain questions that clear up most of the worry I hear about carbon monoxide symptoms.

Q: How quickly do symptoms show up?

It varies with how much carbon monoxide is in the air, but in a closed space it can be within minutes. Don't wait to see how bad it gets — act on the first signs.

Q: What if only I feel it and everyone else seems fine?

Still take it seriously and get to fresh air, especially if an engine is running. People feel it at different rates, and you may simply be the first.

Q: Should I try to find the source before leaving?

No. Get everyone out first, then call 911 and let responders find it. Hunting for the cause indoors just means breathing more of it.

Q: Do I really need a doctor if I feel better outside?

Yes, please get checked. Symptoms can ease in fresh air even when the exposure did real harm, and effects can show up later.

★ There's no silly question here

This is one topic where I'd genuinely rather you call and ask than guess. Reach me at (330) 200-8042 any time you want to talk it through.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks working through this guide, answered plainly.

Q: Can carbon monoxide affect me while I'm asleep?

Yes, and that's the most dangerous time — it can deepen sleepiness so you never wake to notice. That's why alarms that can wake you matter so much.

Q: Why did several of us get sick at the same time?

Because carbon monoxide affects everyone breathing the same air at once, unlike a cold that spreads one person at a time. Several people sick together is a classic warning sign.

Q: Is a little exposure a big deal if the symptoms passed?

Treat it seriously and get checked. Even exposure that fades can have delayed effects, and it's a sign something needs fixing before it happens again.

Q: How is this different from the placement and alarm guides?

Those keep carbon monoxide away and warn you early. This guide is about recognizing it in your own body and knowing exactly what to do — the last layer of the same safety net.

! Read it again if it's been a while

This guide is worth revisiting once a year, or any time a new generator, a new home, or a new household member changes your picture.

Bringing it all together

Everything here comes down to a simple habit of mind: know the signs, trust the pattern, and act early.

Carbon monoxide gives no natural warning, so the warning has to come from you and from your alarms. Learn the symptoms — headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, confusion, and sudden sleepiness — and remember that several people or pets feeling them at once is a red flag all its own.

When you suspect it, the response never changes: everyone and every pet to fresh air first, then 911 from outside, then stay out until responders clear the house, and get a medical check even if you feel better. Keeping the gas away in the first place, and having alarms to warn you, are covered in our guide on the 20-foot rule and our CO-alarms guide.

★ Let's make sure your household is ready

On a visit I can help you check your alarms, talk the symptoms and the plan through with everyone, and make sure the more vulnerable folks in your home are looked after. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

If you remember only one thing

Out of everything in this guide, one habit matters more than all the rest combined.

If you or anyone in the house feels sick, dizzy, or strangely sleepy while a generator or engine is running — especially if more than one of you feels it at once — get everyone and every pet outside into fresh air first, and call 911 from there. Don't wait to be sure. Don't go back in. Fresh air first, every time.

! Say it back to yourself

Feel wrong with an engine running? Everyone out to fresh air. Call 911 from outside. Stay out until it's cleared. Get checked even if you feel better. That's the whole rule, and it can save a life.

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 spotting and responding to carbon monoxide 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

Early Signs of CO Poisoning

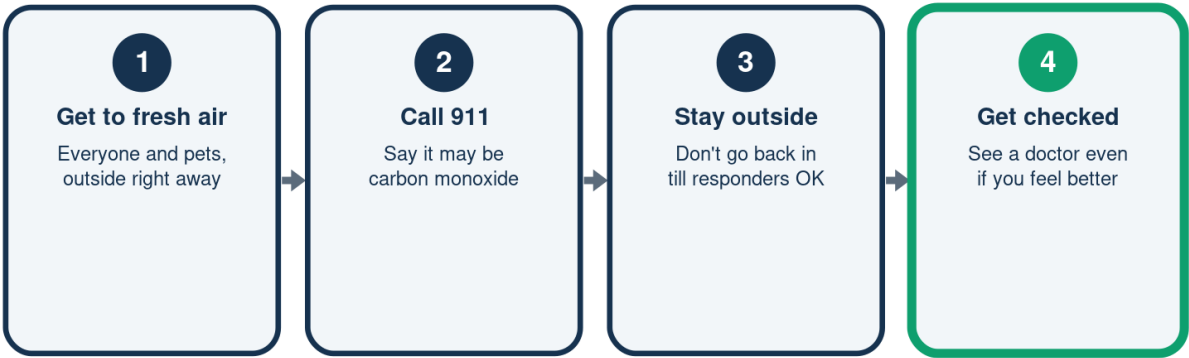
The vague aches that are easy to miss

	What it feels like	Easy to blame on
Headache	Dull, won't quit	A long, hard day
Dizzy	A little woozy	Standing up fast
Nausea	Queasy stomach	Something you ate
Weak, tired	No energy left	Just getting old
Sleepy	Heavy and sudden	Being worn out

Easy to shrug off -- an engine running nearby is what turns them into a warning.

If You Suspect Carbon Monoxide

Fresh air first, questions later



Fresh air first, then call for help -- every single time.

CO vs. the Flu -- How to Tell

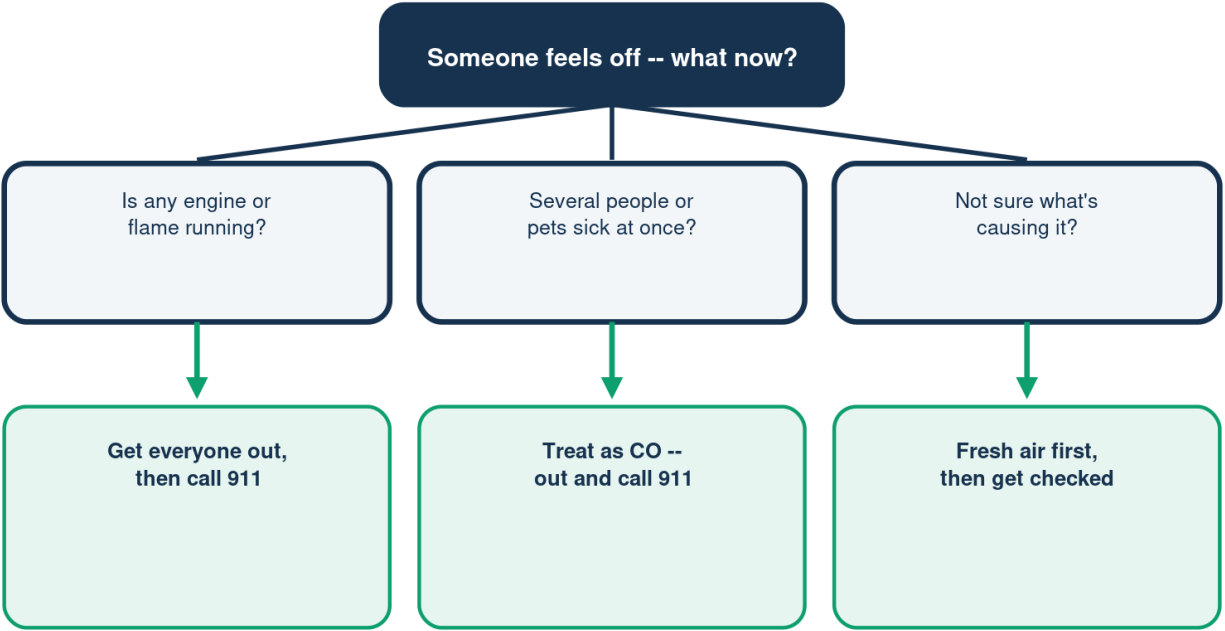
Same tiredness, very different cause

	The flu	Points to CO
Fever?	Often	Usually none
Who feels it	One at a time	Several at once
Go outside	No change	You feel better
Pets sick too?	Not usually	Often, yes
Body aches	Common	Head and dizzy

Feeling better in fresh air, or several sick at once, points straight to CO.

Should You Act on These Symptoms?

When in doubt, treat it as carbon monoxide



CO gives no warning -- when unsure, get to fresh air and call 911.

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



Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.
You just have to remember you can call.
Friendly, in-home tech help -- I come to you.

BILL'S PROMISE

If you are not 100% happy with a visit, I will make it right -- or refund it. No awkwardness, no fine print. That is how I would want to be treated.

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

— Bill

Prefer help without a visit?

Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



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*



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

Use of these guides is subject to our Terms of Use (billshometech.com/terms-of-use).

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

For general information only — not professional advice. Use at your own risk. For electrical, gas, water, or ladder work, please call a licensed professional. — Bill's Home Tech