

March 26, 2019

What the beep is going on with CO alarms?

Recently, the Alameda Fire Department has been responding to an increased number of carbon monoxide calls. Residents hear their CO alarms beeping and call us. We respond “code 3” with lights and sirens and we quickly check their home with our monitoring equipment to ensure that CO levels are safe. Once we are certain there is no imminent danger, we check the home’s CO alarms. Sometimes the batteries simply need to be changed, but more often than not, the whole unit is in need of replacement.

In 2011, the California Senate passed the Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Act, which requires all single-family homes with an attached garage or fossil fuel source to install CO alarms within the home. Most of these alarms have a seven-year lifespan, which explains the recent uptick in this type of call. All alarms that were installed in 2011 are reaching their end-of-life and are beeping to let you know it is time to get a new one.

Please note: Some CO alarms have backup batteries that need to be changed every year while others have batteries that cannot be changed. Both types of alarm require replacement every seven years.

Let us talk a little about carbon monoxide. The colorless, odorless, tasteless gas is produced by many types of appliances in the home, including furnaces, gas stoves and ovens, heaters, and fireplaces, as well as by vehicles that are idling. When a person breathes it in, it replaces the oxygen in the blood, causing the major organs of the body to quickly become oxygen deprived. A large enough dose can kill a person within minutes. This is why we respond to all CO calls “code 3”

CO alarms are not to be confused with smoke detectors or alarms. However, there are combination units available that can alert residents to the presence of both hazards. Any CO alarm must be in a place where its audible beep would wake residents up if it alarmed while they were sleeping. Be sure it has a battery backup so it continues to work even if the power goes out.

Now that you know this, perhaps it would be a good time to inspect your home’s CO alarm. It should have a “replace by” date written on the side of it. If not, and if the age of the detector is unknown, it might be a good idea to consider replacement. As the old saying goes, “Better safe than sorry”. This is definitely one of those times that your safety is in your hands.

For more information on carbon monoxide, please see www.cdc.gov/co/faqs.htm. To learn more about CO alarms, go to <http://osfm.fire.ca.gov> and use the Frequently Accessed Information drop-down menu to choose “Carbon Monoxide Info and Approved Devices” and then select “Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) on Carbon Monoxide (CO) Devices.”

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