

# Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Recognition

NICE CG161 (2010) | NHS England CO Guidance (2022)

## ■ ACTION: Call 999 Immediately

- Patient drowsy, confused, collapsed, unconscious, or has had a seizure
- Chest pain or significant breathlessness
- Multiple people from same household, workplace, or vehicle with similar symptoms
- Carbon monoxide alarm has activated
- Patient cannot safely leave the building
- Pregnant patient with any suspected exposure (carbon monoxide crosses the placenta)

Advise patient to leave building immediately; do not re-enter. Gas appliances: call National Gas Emergency Service 0800 111 999. Other fuels: appropriately qualified engineer.

Feature	Viral Illness	Possible CO Poisoning
Headache	Constant; gradual onset	Worsening on exertion; eases away from building
Nausea/vomiting	With sore throat, cough, or runny nose	Without other viral features
Who is affected	Spreads person to person over days	Multiple people in same building at once
Pets	Unaffected	Also unwell, lethargic, or collapsed
Symptoms away	Present regardless of location	Improve when away from home or workplace
Season	Any time of year	Winter; fuel appliances; poorly ventilated
CO alarm	Not activated	Activated

## ■ ACTION: Urgent Assessment (111, UTC, or A&E;)

- Conscious patient with unexplained headache, nausea, or dizziness without viral features
- Others in the household similarly affected at the same time
- Symptoms improve when away from home or workplace
- Pregnant patient with any suspicion of CO exposure (fetal risk even with mild maternal symptoms)

Advise patient to leave the building and get fresh air now. Do not return until property checked and cleared by a Gas Safe registered engineer.

## ✓ ACTION: Self-Care (Only If CO Excluded)

- Straightforward cold or flu-like illness with no concerning features: provide OTC advice
- Advise all patients with fuel-burning appliances to fit a CO alarm (British Standard EN 50291)
- Alarm should be tested regularly per manufacturer's instructions

**Key reminders:** CO is odourless and colourless; patients will not know they are being poisoned. The classic cherry-red skin is uncommon and unreliable. Always ask: do symptoms improve away from home, and is anyone else in the household affected? Pregnancy requires particularly urgent assessment.