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In the wake of storm season, people should exercise extreme caution when operating portable generators, warns Sam Houston Electric Cooperative.

"These generators are useful when temporary or remote electric power is needed, but they also can be hazardous," said Keith Stapleton, Sam Houston Electric Cooperative's Chief Communications Officer.

The primary hazards to avoid when using a generator are "backfeeding" power into the electric system, electric shock, carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning from the toxic engine exhaust and fire. Every year, people die in incidents related to portable generator use.

Avoid 'Backfeeding'

Never try to power the house wiring by plugging the generator into a wall outlet, a practice known as "backfeeding." This is an extremely dangerous practice that presents an electric shock risk to cooperative utility workers and neighbors served by the same utility transformer. It also bypasses some of the built-in household circuit protection devices.

If you must connect the generator to the house wiring to power appliances, have a qualified electrician install the appropriate equipment in accordance with local electrical codes.

Plug appliances directly into the generator, or use a heavy duty, outdoor-rated extension cord that is rated (in watts or amps) at least equal to the sum of the connected appliance loads. Check that the entire cord is free of cuts or tears and that the plug has all three prongs, especially a grounding pin.

Keep the generator dry and do not use in rainy or wet conditions. Operate it on a dry surface under an open, canopy-like structure. Make sure your hands are dry before touching the generator.

For power outages, permanently installed stationary generators are better suited for providing backup power to the home. Even a properly connected portable generator can become overloaded. This may result in overheating or stressing the generator components, possibly leading to a generator failure.

Danger from CO

Never use a generator in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces. Generators can produce high levels of CO very quickly, which you cannot smell or see. Even if you can't smell exhaust fumes, you may still be exposed to CO. If you start to feel sick, dizzy or weak while using a generator, get to fresh air right away. Do not delay. The CO from generators can rapidly lead to full incapacitation and death.

If you experience serious symptoms, get medical attention immediately. Inform medical staff that CO poisoning is suspected. If you experienced symptoms while indoors, have someone call the fire department to determine when it is safe to re-enter the building.

Follow these safety tips to protect against CO poisoning:

- Never use a generator indoors, including homes, garages, basements, crawl spaces, and other enclosed or partially enclosed areas, even with ventilation. Opening doors and windows or using fans will not prevent CO buildup in the home.

- Follow the instructions that come with your generator. Locate the unit outdoors and away from doors, windows and vents that could allow CO to come indoors.
- Install battery-operated CO alarms or plug-in CO alarms with battery backup in your home, according to the manufacturer's instructions. The CO alarms should be certified to the requirements of the latest safety standards.
- Test your CO alarms frequently and replace dead batteries.

Fire Hazards

Never store fuel for your generator in the home. Gasoline, propane, kerosene and other flammable liquids should be stored outside of living areas in properly labeled, nonglass safety containers. Do not store them near a fuel-burning appliance, such as a natural gas water heater in a garage. If the fuel is spilled or the container is not sealed properly, invisible vapors from the fuel can travel along the ground and can be ignited by the appliance's pilot light or by arcs from electric switches in the appliance.

Before refueling the generator, turn it off and let it cool down. Gasoline spilled on hot engine parts could ignite.

Source: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

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