

NJ Tracking Collaborates to Prevent Residential Carbon Monoxide Poisonings

What was the problem/situation?

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is called the “silent killer” because you can’t see, smell, taste, or hear it. Exposure to low levels of CO can cause headaches, sleepiness, fatigue, confusion and irritability. At higher levels, it can cause nausea, vomiting, irregular heartbeat, impaired vision and coordination, and death.

During 2013, there were about 630 New Jersey residents treated in emergency departments and 44 residents hospitalized for unintentional CO exposure. During 2012, 19 New Jersey residents died from CO exposure. In New Jersey, most CO exposures in homes occur during the cold months of the year and are caused by problems with heating systems or generators.



How was Tracking involved?

Tracking staff are using EpiCenter, the New Jersey Department of Health’s real-time surveillance system, to track a variety of environmentally-related emergency room visits throughout the state. Thresholds for emergency department visits by date, hospital, and region have been set for a variety of environmentally-related visits: storm or extreme weather-related visits, including heat stress; diverse chemical exposures, including carbon monoxide; and occupationally-related exposures.

Tracking staff receive automatic electronic notification whenever emergency department visits for carbon monoxide poisonings are elevated. Tracking staff quickly review the cases using the secure EpiCenter website, and contact hospital or county/local

health department staff who obtain additional information and conduct follow-up as needed.

During the interval of November 10th to 22nd, 2014, Tracking staff in the New Jersey Department of Health's Environmental and Occupational Health Surveillance Program received EpiCenter alerts for 8 cases of CO poisoning that sent 3 New Jersey families to emergency departments. The impacted families included a baby less than one year of age. Follow-up telephone calls determined that the CO poisonings were caused by problems with home heating systems.

In response to the problem, NJ Tracking staff rapidly updated the NJ EPHT CO website with the addition of an infographic button linking to the CDC's CO resources, including fact sheets in 7 languages, hang tags, and other educational materials on preventing CO poisoning.

What action was taken to resolve the problem?

With additional CO poisoning events likely due to the onset of colder weather and winter storms, NJ Tracking staff decided it was important to remind New Jersey's residents about how to avoid CO poisoning. NJ Tracking staff drew on materials on the CDC's CO website and in the Tracking "CO Poisoning Tool Kit", and quickly created a press release and Tweets for New Jersey Commissioner of Health Mary O'Dowd. The press release, "Commissioner O'Dowd Reminds Residents to Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning" was issued on December 19th, 2014. Four Tweets were sent out between December 19th and December 23rd, 2014. The press release was republished at 6 online media sites, and visits to the NJ Tracking CO web page increased three-fold from November to December 2014. The NJ Tracking CO web page moved from being the 22nd most viewed Tracking web page in November 2014 to the 8th and 9th most viewed Tracking web page in December 2014 and January 2015 respectively.

NJSHAD serves as the main data portal for NJDOH, providing public access to data and information from the entire New Jersey Department of Health, and hosts datasets for the New Jersey Environmental Public Health Tracking (NJEPHT) Program. NJSHAD provides static public health indicators which combine data and information, and dynamic custom public health query tools. The functionality, content, and utility of NJSHAD and the NJEPHT portal are constantly being enhanced.