

February 2014

Emergency Preparedness Pointers

Need Electricity? Provide It Safely

It does not take a major event for the electricity to go out in a house. A vehicle accident or a short, but intense storm could temporarily knock out the power to an area of town. Responses to these types of events are pretty quick and backup power tends not to be an issue for homeowners. But what about a prolonged power outage due to a much larger event? A portable electric generator could be the answer, but this equipment must be used safely in order to avoid issues that can be much worse than a power outage.

Generator Tragedies Post Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina knocked the power out in a large area and many people used portable generators as a source of power. An Associated Press story dated 10/13/2005 noted, "... five deaths were among fifty-one cases of carbon monoxide poisoning reported in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama after the hurricane, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. All of these cases involved the misuse of portable generators, except for one that involved a gasoline-powered pressure washer. Four deaths occurred in one Louisiana house where a generator was used. The fifth death occurred in a Louisiana house where a generator was used in an attached garage." These illnesses and deaths could have been prevented.

Safe Practices For Generator Use

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) provides these simple tips for safe generator use.

Avoid Carbon Monoxide Hazards:

- ▶ Always use generators outdoors, away from doors, windows and vents.
- ▶ NEVER use generators in homes, garages, basements, crawl spaces, or other enclosed or partially enclosed areas, even with ventilation.
- ▶ Follow manufacturer's instructions.
- ▶ Install battery-operated or plug-in (with battery backup) carbon monoxide (CO) alarms in your home, following manufacturer's instructions.
- ▶ Test CO alarms often and replace batteries at least once a year.



Avoid Electrical Hazards:

- ▶ Keep the generator dry. Operate on a dry surface under an open, canopy- like structure.
- ▶ Plug appliances directly into generator or use a heavy-duty outdoor- rated extension cord. Make sure the entire extension cord is free of cuts or tears and the plug has all 3 prongs, especially a grounding pin.
- ▶ Dry your hands before touching the generator.
- ▶ NEVER plug the generator into a wall outlet. This practice, known as backfeeding, can cause an electrocution risk to utility workers and others served by the same utility transformer.
- ▶ If necessary to connect generator to house wiring to power appliances, have a qualified electrician install appropriate equipment. Or, your utility company may be able to install an appropriate transfer switch.

Avoid Fire Hazards:

- ▶ Before refueling the generator, turn it off and let it cool. Fuel spilled on hot engine parts could ignite.
- ▶ Always store fuel outside of living areas in properly labeled, non-glass containers
- ▶ Store fuel away from any fuel-burning appliance and keep a fire extinguisher nearby.

Use It Wisely

Everything has a limit, including a generator. The total wattage used by appliances or equipment must be less than generator's output rating. Overloading the generator can cause fires in the electrical cords or seriously damage the devices being powered by it. If in doubt, do not add any extra load. Remember to only use a generator when necessary or when practicing preparedness and safety procedures.

