



DeKalb County Cooperative Extension

SAFETY TIPS FOR USING A PORTABLE GENERATOR

A portable generator may seem like a life-saving device when you lose electrical power, but it can also become a life-threatening device when not used properly. The dangers include carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, electrical shocks and fire. Below are some tips to protect you and your family.

Tip 1. Purchase a portable generator that meets your family's power needs. Decide what appliances are necessities and then calculate the wattage needed to run the appliance along with the extra wattage required to start each appliance. Running wattage is also called "rated watts" and can be found on the appliance nameplate. Starting wattage is usually two to seven times greater than the running wattage.

Tip 2. Use it safely. Place the unit outdoors, away from any enclosed space such as a garage or carport, and away from doors, windows and vents. You want to keep the CO away from your home. CO is a byproduct of the exhaust from the generator and exposure to a high concentration of CO can cause unconsciousness and even death. Did you know that one portable generator can produce as much CO as hundreds of running automobiles?

Tip 3. Be aware of the signs of CO poisoning. You cannot smell or see CO, so if you start feeling dizzy, weak or sick, get fresh air immediately. For extra protection, install CO alarms that are either battery-operated, or use a battery backup.

Tip 4. Guard against shock and electrocution. To reduce electrical risks, place the generator on a flat surface under a tarp or canopy to keep it dry and allow air circulation. The electrical switch should be placed in a watertight box and grounded. In addition, you should not plug the extension cord running from the portable generator into an outlet in the house. This causes the electricity to flow backwards and could electrocute someone in the house or in a nearby house that is served by the same transformer. This is known as backfeeding. If the generator must be connected to your house wiring, have it done by a qualified electrician.

Tip 5. Reduce fire risk. Store fuel for the generator in an approved safety can outside of living areas and away from fuel burning appliances like a gas water heater. If you spill any fuel, clean it up immediately and never add fuel to a hot generator. Gasoline that is spilled on a hot generator can catch fire.

To learn more about portable generators link to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission fact sheet.

<http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/portgen.pdf>