

All-Party Parliamentary
carbonmonoxide
Group

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Carbon Monoxide Safety at Festivals: Parliamentary Discussion

About the All-Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group

The All-Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (APPCOG) is the leading forum for Parliamentarians from both Houses and all parties to work together in tackling carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, improving government policy on CO safety, and raising public awareness of the threat posed by deadly CO gas.

Through its busy programme of events and research, the APPCOG seeks to push the vital issue of CO safety up the political agenda. In doing so, the APPCOG works closely with a coalition of CO campaigners, charities and energy industry companies committed to tackling CO poisoning in the APPCOG Stakeholder Forum. The Group also connects Parliamentarians with specialist advice from its working groups, which are made up of medical, healthcare, science and research, and communication professionals. Recent reports by the APPCOG include '*Carbon monoxide alarms: keeping tenants safe and secure in their homes*' and '*Carbon monoxide poisoning: saving lives, advancing treatment*'.

Background

CO is an invisible, odourless and tasteless toxic gas produced when carbon-containing fuels burn incompletely. Sources of CO can be found throughout festivals, including portable barbeques (BBQs) in tents, fossil-fuelled generators, and fuel-burning appliances in catering vans.

The symptoms of CO poisoning include headaches, nausea, seizures, paralysis, feeling "fluey", memory loss, and changes in mood. This is a particular challenge at festivals as the symptoms can easily be confused for hangovers. High-level exposure can cause coma and death in minutes. Low-level chronic exposure is also harmful and can lead to long-term neurological effects.

CO poisoning causes approximately 30 deaths and 200 hospital admissions in England and Wales each year, and costs the taxpayer an estimated £178 million per annum.¹ These figures are likely underestimates due to the difficulty of diagnosing CO poisoning and a lack of reporting.

The APPCOG has heard troubling reports of festivalgoers exposing themselves to CO by bringing BBQs into tents with them. Addressing this risk was an important focus of our 2015 report *Carbon monoxide: from awareness to action*. Following that report, the APPCOG has worked with Parliamentarians, festival providers, communication professionals, and members of the CO community to discuss ways of improving CO safety at festivals. This document is a write-up of a Parliamentary discussion held on the 5 March 2019 chaired by Alex Cunningham MP, and focussed on three key themes:-

- Reducing the risk of CO poisoning when festivalgoers are on site;
- Expanding public awareness of CO risks at festivals using a coordinated campaign; and
- Identifying new methods of reaching festivalgoers to achieve these two goals.

¹ Policy Connect. (2017a). *Carbon monoxide poisoning: saving lives, advancing treatment*. [Online]. Available at: www.policyconnect.org.uk/appcog/sites/site_appcog/files/report/633/fieldreportdownload/comedreportfinalweb.pdf [Accessed 21 February 2019], p. 3.

Carbon monoxide poisoning at festivals

BBQs (both alight and extinguished) produce large amounts of CO but usually pose a low risk when used outdoors. When a BBQ is brought inside a tent, the CO produced isn't ventilated and is therefore retained, resulting in CO levels rising. This is particularly risky in a small space like a tent.

Unfortunately, the risk of improperly using cooking devices is high due to low public awareness of CO, with 49% of festivalgoers saying they would use a BBQ inside their tent.² A lack of knowledge also prevents people from recognising CO poisoning's symptoms (which can resemble flu or a hangover), thereby delaying medical help and potentially prolonging exposure.

BBQs continue to give off CO after they have been extinguished. This is especially dangerous if the BBQ is brought inside the tent at night for warmth, safety or protection from the weather, since people may fall asleep whilst CO builds up to higher concentrations.

Campaigning to improve public awareness is difficult because cautious behavioural norms may be temporarily abandoned at festivals, making festivalgoers less receptive to safety messaging.

How to address CO's impact on festivalgoers

Reducing on-site risks

A recurring theme during the discussion was the need to tackle the on-site risk factors of CO poisoning, such as the improper usage of BBQs in tents. This requires a multi-pronged strategy combining awareness-raising initiatives with direct intervention from festival providers.

Though attendees acknowledged that disposable BBQ manufacturers include CO safety warnings on packaging, some expressed concerns that CO information was small and in inconvenient locations, thereby limiting its impact. To address this, the group agreed manufacturers should display CO safety information more prominently on disposable BBQs. Production of these CO warnings could be tied to broader awareness-raising efforts described below. If festivals were to sell BBQs on site, they could take responsibility for including prominent CO safety messaging on them as part of this.

The group agreed that festival staff – including security personnel, medical workers and volunteers – could play an invaluable role in identifying risky behaviours and preventing CO poisoning. Specifically, staff should be trained to recognise CO poisoning's risk factors and symptoms, which would:

- Enable staff to act as trusted intermediaries and offer information to festivalgoers on staying CO safe;
- Help staff spot and intervene to prevent risky behaviours when patrolling camping areas, such as taking BBQs inside tents; and
- Support diagnosis and treatment when festivalgoers present with CO poisoning symptoms;

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) Disposable BBQ manufacturers should display prominent and easy-to-understand warnings on packaging in order to prevent users taking BBQs inside enclosed spaces such as tents.
- 2) Festival providers should train their staff to recognise the risk factors and symptoms of CO poisoning in order to raise awareness, intervene when risky behaviours are spotted, and improve support for festivalgoers exposed to CO.

² Policy Connect. (2017a). *Carbon monoxide poisoning: saving lives, advancing treatment*, p. 70.

Clear messaging

Though on-site interventions are impactful, it cannot be a substitute for informing all festivalgoers of CO's risks and dangers. Attendees agreed that awareness raising in festivals should focus on preventing the unsafe use of BBQs in tents, acknowledging that many festivalgoers will be unaware of what CO is.

Information on using BBQs safely should be conveyed as a short singular message, rather than being muddled into broader safety information. A suggestion was 'Don't bring your BBQ in the tent – CO kills'. Activity must be planned well in advance, as certain messaging opportunities are sent out months before the festival. To implement this practically, existing and unbranded CO safety messaging should be collated, and then distributed to festivalgoers via networks of festivals providers and associations.

RECOMMENDATION:

- 3) **CO campaign groups should agree a clear simple message for awareness raising.**
- 4) **Festival providers and CO campaign groups should collaborate to collate and distribute simple CO safety messaging pertinent to festivals.**

Expanding reach

To expand the reach of this collated CO safety messaging, a multi-media strategy that disseminates information both before and during the festival is required.

Utilising mobile phones would enable novel methods of raising awareness of CO poisoning. For example, native advertising adapts its presentation for different mobile phones and could effectively convey short bursts of safety information. Social media would further enhance this, as user data enables campaigns to narrowly focus their content and efforts on audiences attending specific festivals. Lastly, many festivals develop apps for mobile phones that could disseminate more-detailed CO safety information and send push notifications tied to meal times reminding festivalgoers not to improperly use BBQs.

An issue repeatedly raised by festival providers was that waiting until the festival to raise awareness was insufficient, and attendees agreed CO safety messaging must begin prior to festivals, in order to build a base-level of safety awareness. Mediums to achieve this could include warnings on tickets, safety messaging in emails, and displaying CO information more prominently on festival websites.

Lastly, attendees highlighted the initial difficulty of getting festivalgoers to engage with safety messaging. To address this, we recommend using higher-profile partners as an initial gateway to information on CO's risks and dangers. Examples of these partners could include music acts, festival-related media, and Parliamentarians with an interest or constituency connected to festivals.

RECOMMENDATION:

- 5) **Festival providers and CO campaign groups should utilise novel ways of delivering targeted CO safety messaging to festivalgoers, such as native advertising on mobile phones and high-profile partners.**

Contact Details

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