



AUSTIN POLICE DEPARTMENT

Risk Management

Safety Bulletin

February 27th, 2017

Possible Risk of Carbon Monoxide Gas

SUMMARY

There have been a few recent media reports about incidents where drivers have potentially been affected by Carbon Monoxide (CO) fumes while operating late model Ford Explorers. This includes police officers driving the newer Patrol version. There have been two reported incidents within the Austin Police Department, one was for lightheadedness while driving a patrol SUV; the other was for a suspicious odor that a sergeant was concerned about while he was operating a patrol SUV.

The Ford Motor company, along with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, (NHTSA) is investigating the issue. Their testing and research has not resulted in any direct conclusions about CO poisoning from these particular models, or the need to conduct a recall on any of the Ford Explorer SUV recent year models. The COA Fleet Services is aware of the issue and is actively monitoring this situation. APD Risk Management is working with COA Fleet Services and other partners to stay current with the latest information.

At this time, APD Risk Management is not aware of any information to indicate that APD should discontinue use of late model Ford Explorers. Instead, officers should be aware of the inherent, but remote risks posed by CO that are always present when operating a motor vehicle, and should take some basic steps to reduce those risks.

Carbon Monoxide is an odorless and colorless gas that is emitted by ALL motor vehicles that burn fossil fuels.

According to the center for disease control (CDC), symptoms of CO poisoning are:

Headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. CO symptoms are often described as “flu-like.” If you breathe in enough CO gas it can cause unconsciousness which can lead to death.

There are some reports stating that the risk of CO gas exposure is increased while the vehicle’s ventilation system (A/C, Heat, and fan) is set on “recirculate”. The recirculate button is located on the dash console and often uses the following image:



This button determines whether or not your car is cooling or heating fresh air from outside the car, or using the air within the car (recirculated air). Using the vehicle's air conditioning system with the control set to recirculation being on, will generally cool the vehicle faster and help the vehicle stay cooler because you're constantly using the cool air from within the car for air conditioning. In non-recirculation mode, when you're using fresh air from outside the vehicle (which is much warmer in the summer), the air conditioning must work continuously to cool the hot air while pulling it into the vehicle. This creates additional work for the A/C system. Another benefit to using recirculate, is when you need to avoid unpleasant odors & fumes from outside the vehicle, such as during heavy traffic congestion.

Using recirculate is generally the better option for fuel efficiency and climate control when operating the A/C.; however, there is a POSSIBLE increase in the risk of contaminating the cabin air with CO from the vehicle exhaust system when recirculating air. Officers should be cognizant of the potential danger and introduce fresh air from the outside as regularly as possible. There has been no evidence in NHTSA's recent investigation that would indicate the need to stop using the recirculate button entirely.

Officers can take several steps to recognize and protect themselves from possible danger.

These steps should always be taken, regardless of any current media reports, because CO inhalation is ALWAYS a danger when operating a motor vehicle:

1. When you are using a vehicle that will be idling for long periods of time (traffic control, street closures, etc.) be sure to allow fresh air to enter the cabin on a regular basis.
2. Maintain awareness of your condition and mental state. If you begin feeling any of the above listed symptoms, introduce fresh air into your unit's cabin.
3. Exit the vehicle on a regular basis to obtain fresh air. This will also help in your blood circulation.
4. If you are becoming lethargic or excessively tired, open the vehicle windows or exit the vehicle and get fresh air.
5. Pay attention to where you park. Most CO inhalation deaths that occur in motor vehicles occur when the driver is in an enclosed space (garage), when snow or mud obstructs the exhaust pipe or when the terrain restricts the free flow of exhaust fumes away from the vehicle.

APD Risk Management will continue to track the Ford and NHTSA studies and will update Department personnel with important safety information.