

Use Portable Electric Generators Safely

By Chris Grammes

Portable electric generators can offer many benefits when a long-term electrical outage occurs due to a storm. However, if generators are not used properly, things could turn deadly.

After Hurricane Katrina, for example, many people relied on generators. But the misuse of them caused five deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC also reported 51 cases of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Follow these tips to prevent misuse of portable electrical generators:

- Be sure to follow manufacturers' directions for installation and operation.
- To prevent electric shock, make sure your generator is properly grounded. The operation manual should provide correct grounding procedures.
- Operate electric generators or other fuel-powered machines outside where deadly carbon monoxide fumes cannot enter the home.
- Use the generator only in a well-ventilated and dry area located away from air intakes to the house. Do not use a generator in an attached garage.
- Do not overload the generator by operating more appliances and equipment than the generator can handle. The operating instructions should have an output rating for the generator.
- Individual appliances should be plugged directly into the receptacle outlet of the generator using appropriately sized extension cords to carry the electric load. Make sure the cords are rated for outdoor use, have a grounded, three-pronged plug, and are in good condition.

- Do not run extension cords under rugs.
- Never connect generators directly to your home's wiring. The reverse flow of electricity can electrocute an unsuspecting utility worker.
- Never plug a generator into a household outlet.
- Do not refuel a generator while it is running.
- Only store fuel outside of living areas and away from heat sources like water heater pilot lights.
- Turn off all equipment powered by the generator before shutting it down.
- Keep children and pets away from generators.

Sources: Consumer Product Safety Commission, Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service

Chris Grammes writes on safety issues for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the Arlington, Va.-based service arm of the nation's 900-plus consumer-owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives.