

Beware of deadly silo gases

There's no question that modern glass-lined silos offer advantages to farmers in feed and forage preservation. But they also present a greater hazard to human health if not used properly.

That's the warning from Gary L. Smith, Extension safety specialist and agricultural engineering instructor at the University of Maryland in College Park.

Smith notes that old-fashioned concrete and masonry silos had enough porosity to allow poisonous silo gases to seep out slowly. Yellowish stains on older, much-

used silos in rural areas around the country give proof of this phenomenon.

But modern airtight silos do not offer similar protection to human health, Smith points out. Manufacturers are aware of this hazard, and they have provided blower fans and stenciled safety instructions which should be carefully followed.

Basic precautions are as follows:

—When filling upright silos, run the blower fan for 15 to 20 minutes before you enter the structure.

Keep the blower running as long as someone is inside the silo.

—After a silo is filled, keep all persons and animals away for at least two weeks — preferably three weeks. Never open up a silo unless someone else is close enough to come to your rescue if necessary.

—Keep the door closed between your barn and silo room during the danger period to protect livestock from silo gas.

—Provide for natural ventilation during the danger period to carry away silo gas fumes. This includes keeping outside doors and windows

open in your silo room. Remove chute doors in your silo to the level of the settled silage.

Be on the alert for bleach-like odors or yellowish brown fumes in or near your silo, the Maryland Extension safety specialist cautions. These are the telltale signs of nitrogen dioxide, the poisonous component of silo gas.

If you experience the slightest throat irritation or coughing in or around a silo, get to fresh air quickly, Smith warns. Only two or three breaths of silo gas can cause temporary loss of your sense of smell. This can lead to a false sense of security that the poisonous

gas has gone away.

You can make your own test monitor for detecting silo gas by starting with a clean paper filter from the coffee-maker in your kitchen or the strainer in your milk room.

In a small clean dish, mix the following solution: ¼ teaspoon of liquid cornstarch; ½ teaspoon of potassium iodide (brown iodine - not red) and ½ cup (3 shot glasses of water).

Soak the paper disk in the liquid solution; then dry the disk in an oven at 100 to 125 degrees Fahrenheit. Fold Scotch tape over one edge of the disk and make a hole for hanging. Wet the disk with water and hang at the bottom of silo chute or inside the chamber of bottom-unloading silos. If the disk turns purple, silo gas is present. Once this chemical reaction occurs, the disk may not be reused.



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