

## Canaries in the coal mine

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One local family was saved from carbon monoxide poisoning by birds like this parakeet. Birds are more sensitive to the deadly gas than humans and the birds sacrifice saved their owners lives.

Years ago canaries were used as carbon monoxide detectors in coal mines.

The little birds were more sensitive to the deadly gas than the human miners. And when they began to feel the effects, the miners knew it was time to evacuate the mine.

Carbon monoxide is still a deadly and, according to the Center for Disease Control, more than 400 people die and 4,000 people are hospitalized every year for carbon monoxide poisoning.

If it hadn't been for their parakeets and a quick thinking vet, Tina and Lance Collins would be two more victims of this deadly gas.

"He has saved our lives," Tina said about Dr. Kyle Daniel at the Animal Care Veterinary Hospital in Murfreesboro. "Without his quick and professional diagnosis of Beaker, we would never have known we had a carbon monoxide leak until it was

possibly too late."

A few weeks ago Tina Collins made a frantic call to Daniels at the animal hospital. One of her two birds, Beaker, was sick.

"She called and said Beaker doesn't look good and is on the bottom of his cage, not breathing," Daniels said.

Collins rushed her beloved bird to the vet but he died along the way.

Daniels said at first he thought the bird had just fallen victim to a common avian gastrointestinal disease, but things changed quickly.

By the time Collins returned home her other parakeet, ChaCha, was exhibiting the very same symptoms.

"Red flags began to come up in my mind," Daniels said. "Why would two birds who live together pass away within an hour of each other?"

He said that doesn't happen without an environmental factor.

"I saw something more was going on," Daniels said.

So Daniels asked Collins what kind of heater and water heater she had.

Collins said her home had gas for both her central heat and air and her water heater.

Daniels suggested the birds might have died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Collins then called her gas company, who couldn't find any leak.

But when the bird's autopsy came back, it confirmed his suspicions. The birds had died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

"Had he not suggested an autopsy, we would have let things drop with the gas company, who assured us that our house was safe even though we still had a dangerous gas leak," Collins said.

So Collins called another company, who found a carbon monoxide leak near the hot water heater, near the corner where the birds lived.

After the leak was found, Collins began to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

The morning the birds died, Collins, her husband and some houseguests had taken showers. Afterward, her husband, Lance, complained of stomach pains and their cat "was walking around like it was drunk," Daniels said.

These are the most common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain and confusion. When the gas levels reach high enough, victims will pass out and can eventually die, the CDC's website said.

The most common cause of high carbon monoxide levels in homes are gas- or oil-burning appliances, like heaters and water heaters, and fireplaces that are not properly vented.

The CDC suggests having these appliances and fireplaces checked annually by a certified professional and install a CO detector in your home.

Collins didn't have a CO detector, other than the birds.

"It's really a mixed blessing that the birds died," Daniels said. "The birds were like the canary in the coal mine."