

# **"If you smell gas, get out fast." But, then what happens next?**

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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EDWARDSVILLE - Ameren Illinois customer Tony White opened his home to media and Ameren Illinois staff and workers Monday afternoon in an effort to educate consumers on gas smell safety.

As all users of natural gas should know - if a smell of rotten eggs is noticed within the home, it could be a gas leak. That smell is added artificially to the product as a safety measure. Usually, natural gas has no odor whatsoever. That pungent smell is a way to notify customers they have a leak, which can be serious trouble. While nine times out of

10, the smell is not related to gas or an overall minor problem, Ameren Illinois Public Awareness Coordinator Gina Taylor said customers should call any time they notice that smell and cannot find the source immediately.

"We don't mind going out to calls and finding out it's nothing," she said. "People should call us any time they have a worry about a gas leak. We have people available 24/7 and 365 days a year, and there is no charge."

In fact, Taylor said customers should call Ameren Illinois directly any time they have a worry about a potential gas leak. She said calling Ameren Illinois at 1-800-755-5000 should even be done before calling the fire department or 911, as Ameren Illinois has experts on gas leaks and the fire department would just call them anyway once a leak is reported.

Ameren Illinois gas technician Charlie Wilson walked reporters through the process he goes through upon arrival to the home. His first stop is the gas meter. He said the first thing he must do is ensure he is at the right home based on the number on the meter. His next step is to ensure the arrow on the meter is stable and not spinning wildly.

"If it's spinning, that means there is a major leak, and my next steps then would be to evacuate the home owner and maybe nearby homes," he said. "Then, we will call the phone company and any other service to have anything shut off which may be an ignition source."

Some signs of a significant leak may include dying or browning vegetation as well as swarms of insects on the site.

"Flies love the smell of natural gas for some reason," Taylor said during the outdoor inspection. "A lot of times when people cannot grow bushes near the front of their homes, it can be do to a gas leak."

Once the outside meter has been checked, Wilson enters the home with a special tool designed to "sniff out" both natural gas and carbon monoxide. While natural gas is part of Ameren Illinois's expertise, Taylor said customers are advised to call Poison Control Center upon carbon monoxide being detected.

"We check for carbon monoxide as well," she said. "Carbon monoxide is caused by the improper burning of fossil fuels. When we check the furnace, if a flame is visible, we make sure it is sharp and blue. If it is sloppy and orange and yellow, it may be caused by improper burning, which could cause a carbon monoxide problem."

After the entry of the home is checked, Wilson said he asks the homeowner where the smell or sound of a potential gas leak is the strongest. If there is not definite concentration, Wilson said he leads the customer toward two of the major culprits for the leak – the hot water heater and the furnace – which are in White's basement in this case.

Wilson said he leads the way to ensure customer safety.

“A lot of times people will show me to the basement and flick the light switch,” Wilson said. “That could be a possible ignition source, so I try to lead the way to prevent things like that from happening. A lot of people don't realize that little flick could be the spark to set it off.”



Another candidate for the “spark that set it off” could be scented candles many customers light around the home after smelling the foul odor. Taylor said, while fire should be a self-evident spark for such a dangerous incident, people would be surprised by the amount of people who forget about that in order to escape the odor.

In the basement, Wilson used his instrument to inspect both White's hot water heater and furnace. He said he checks for code violations and potential hazards while inspecting the pipes. He said hazards such as ill-fitting piping and missing doors on the hot water heater as well as missing valves could prove extremely problematic to homeowners.

Taylor provided another example of a hazard in the home in the form of brass connectors for gas-powered stoves. While White uses an electric stove, Taylor said brass connectors, which have not been manufactured since the 1970s, often come with older stoves. Many people do not think to update the brass connectors to the preferred – and much safer – stainless steel connectors.

“It's not a matter of if these things will break,” she said. “It's a matter of when. So, every time we go out and see one of these, we have to replace it.”

Wilson then performs a “shut-in” test to ensure there are no leaks in the pipes he cannot physically reach within the home. He said, if there are no leaks, the entire process will take between 30-45 minutes.

Gas leaks are not found in many of the calls received by Ameren Illinois, but usually the source of the smell is located. Taylor said many homes using sump pumps and septic systems can experience a bit of waste backup, especially after a rain, which could cause a similar smell to a natural gas leak. If no gas leak is detected, but the smell's source cannot be located, Wilson said he may lose sleep.

“I have definitely lost sleep over cases where we could not locate the source of the smell,” he said. “I've come back to some homes the next day just to make sure they were OK, even after doing the shut-in test and finding nothing. I've double-checked around the home just to ensure there was no gas leak.”

White said he volunteered his home as a customer for both a chance to educate the public and his own reassurance his gas lines are in great working condition. He said he has been a customer of Ameren Illinois since moving to Edwardsville in the mid-1980s, and said he has had no problems with their services, adding they alert him and educate him with what they are doing in a timely fashion.