

Radon: The silent killer in your home

Mary Bowerman, USATODAY (</staff/7781/mary-bowerman>) 6 a.m. EDT April 27, 2014



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Tobacco smoke in a home is easy to detect as it drifts through the air or leaves its odor in clothes or furniture. Its health toll is equally as obvious as the leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S.

Less obvious and almost as deadly is radon, an odorless gas that causes 21,000 lung cancer deaths a year. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S. and the leading cause of lung cancer in non-smokers. It's a bigger concern during cold winters like the one we've just experienced when radon levels sky rocket in well-sealed homes.

The odorless gas is caused by the natural breakdown of uranium in soil and water and seeps into homes through drains and cracks in the foundation. While radon is natural in the air, levels can be harmful when it is trapped inside a house.

In the U.S. 1 in 15 homes have unsafe radon levels, according to the Environmental Protection Agency website.

While the EPA website has a map of zones in the U.S. showing areas that may have higher radon levels, Janice Nolen, assistant vice president at the American Lung Association, said people cannot assume they do not have a radon problem.

"We've had cases where the house next store was fine but the next one over had a problem with radon," Nolen said. "Across the country in every single state there have been cases of houses with high radon levels."

Now a push for more radon awareness is coming from the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, an affiliation of groups set on improving children's environmental health. The partnership hopes radon home testing becomes as common as the fire alarm and carbon monoxide alarm precautions people take in their homes.

Erica Phipps, the group's executive director, said radon does not receive much public awareness, but it should.

"When you look at the lung cancer statistics and the role radon plays it's astounding," Phipps said.

Nolen said testing is as easy as going to a home improvement store and buying an at-home kit for between \$10 and \$20. The monitor is left on a low level shelf close to the floor for anywhere from 24 hours to a week and than sent off for the levels to be checked.

If radon levels are high in a home the EPA website has a state-by-state guide to finding contractors that deal with radon. The EPA also has a handbook for reducing radon, with fixes ranging from extraction pipes below the home to covering the floor of crawl spaces with high density plastic and using fans to draw the radon out and vent it outside.

"This is a problem anyone can have," Nolen said. "Radon levels can be fixed, it's just an issue of identifying the problem and getting it taken care of."

The EPA lists the following ways that radon can get into buildings:

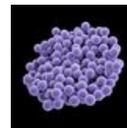
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- Construction joints
- Gaps in suspended floors
- Gaps around service pipes
- Cavities inside walls
- The water supply

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