Radon: A silent killer in your home

Organization says simple monitoring can save lives

Mary Bowerman
USA TODAY

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 USA.

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 USA and the leading cause of lung cancer in non-smokers. It's a bigger concern during cold winters like the one much of the country has just experienced, when radon levels skyrocket 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 USA, one in 15 homes have unsafe radon levels, according to the Environmental Protection Agency website.



Source Environmental Protection Agency
FRANK POMPA, USA TODAY

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, says people cannot assume they do not have a radon problem.

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

Now a push for greater radon awareness is coming from the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, a coalition of groups set on improving children's environmental health.



ABOVE, AMERICAN LUNG; AIRCHEK

Janice Nolen of the American Lung Association says radon home test kits such as one by AirChek cost as little as $10 to $20. Radon "is a problem anyone can have," she says.

The partnership hopes radon home testing becomes as common for people as fire alarm and carbon monoxide alarm precautions.

Erica Phipps, the group's executive director, says 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," she says.

Nolen says testing is as easy as going to a home improvement store and buying an at-home kit for $10 to $20.

The monitor is left on a shelf close to the floor for anywhere from 24 hours to a week and then sent off for the levels to be checked.

If radon levels are high, the EPA offers a handbook with tips for reducing radon and a website with a state-by-state guide to help find contractors who can eliminate radon.

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