

# Don't risk your family's health, beware of radon

By Clark Snyder

Smoking is the No. 1 cause of lung cancer in America. But every year thousands of nonsmokers are diagnosed with lung cancer from exposure to a tasteless, odorless, invisible gas. Radon, a gas that occurs naturally in the soil in some places in every state, is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the USA.

Radon can seep into homes and other buildings through the soil in Montana. The only way to know whether your home has unhealthy levels of radon is to test for it.

If your home has never been tested or you aren't sure, it's a good idea to test for radon now. Another important time to test is when you are renovating or plan to change the use of space in your basement so that someone will spend more time there. For example, if you are converting basement space to a bedroom or family room.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends that homes be tested for radon by a professional contractor before the home is bought or sold.

## **Free test kits**

Do-it-yourself radon test kits sell for less than \$20 at hardware stores and other retailers. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality is offering free test kits (while supplies last) to Montana residents for Radon Awareness Month.

To order a free test kit, visit: [deq.mt.gov/energy/Programs/radon](http://deq.mt.gov/energy/Programs/radon)

If the test indicates that the radon level is high, there are options for reducing radon to make air in the home safe. The DEQ web page listed above for free test kits also has a listing of professional radon mitigation contractors certified by the National Radon Proficiency Program or the National Radon Safety board.

Any radon exposure carries some risk, according to the EPA. The agency recommends that radon be mitigated in homes if an occupant's long-term exposure, as determined by testing, will average 4 picocuries per liter or higher.

## **Testing tips**

- Typically, the highest level of radon will be on the lowest level of the home. The test should be conducted in a regularly used room on that level.

- If the lowest occupied level is not used much, consider also testing a higher-use area.
- The EPA recommends testing all homes below the third floor.
- Avoid testing in a kitchen, bathroom, laundry room or hallway. High humidity and drafts can throw off the results from some test devices.
- Place testing devices out of the way and do not disturb them while they are sampling.

The cost of making repairs to reduce the radon level varies. In some homes, simply sealing cracks in the basement floor and foundation will reduce radon. In other cases a more extensive work is needed. The average cost for a contractor to lower radon levels in a home can range from \$500 to \$2,500 or more.

If someone in your household smokes, radon testing is especially urgent. Cigarette smokers exposed to radon have 10 times the risk of developing lung cancer from radon exposure compared to nonsmokers.

Winter is the ideal time to test because doors and windows are kept closed, so the concentration of radon would be highest. Find out if radon is in your home by getting it tested soon.

*Clark Snyder, program manager for RiverStone Health Environmental Health Services, can be reached at 406-256-2770*