

Survey: 1 in 4 homes have high radon

With new test results showing one out of four homes in Nevada with elevated levels of radon, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension officials are urging all homeowners to have their homes tested for the cancer-causing gas.

Susan Howe, program director for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Radon Education Program, said more than 4,000 homes were tested in Nevada last year - thanks in large part to the more than 4,550 free test kits distributed by UNCE during National Radon Action Month last January.

Although the Nevada State Health Division conducted a radon survey in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Cooperative Extension's kit-distribution efforts have resulted in thousands of additional tests in homes throughout the state. The data from those more than 5,268 tests shows elevated levels of radon were found in 25.2 percent of all homes tested statewide.

The largest number of tests - more than 2,300 - have been done in Washoe County, and nearly 20 percent of the homes had elevated radon levels. As of June 30, 2009, the 1,226 tests done in Douglas County showed elevated radon levels in more than 40 percent of the homes. Pershing County has the highest rate of elevated readings - 60 percent - but only 61 tests had been conducted.

Nearly 35 percent of the homes in Carson City were found to be higher than the EPA level, based on 444 tests. Among the 79 homes tested in White Pine County, 21.5 percent had elevated levels. Esmeralda, Eureka and Storey counties have not had enough tests completed for the radon results in those counties to be statistically significant.

Radon is an odorless, colorless, radioactive gas emanating naturally from the soil. It enters a home through foundation cracks, plumbing and utility openings, and becomes a health risk when trapped inside. The EPA estimates 21,000 people in the U.S. die each year from lung cancer caused by radon exposure - more than secondhand smoke, drunken driving, falls in the home, drowning or home fires.

Not everyone exposed to radon will get lung cancer, but the greater the amount of radon and the longer the exposure, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer. The EPA has established an "action level" of 4 picoCuries per liter of air, Howe said.

Homes that exceed that level can be retrofitted with an inexpensive radon reduction system by a qualified contractor to correct the problem.

Howe said she is hoping more Nevadans will have their homes tested. The best time to test is when the weather is cool and windows in the house are closed. Oct. 18-24 is Radon Action Week.

"Since testing is the only way to know, we encourage every homeowner to test their home for radon," Howe said.

Radon can enter any home - old or new, well-sealed or drafty. Homes with basements, slab on grade, crawl spaces or no visible foundation cracks are susceptible. Buildings other than homes can also have radon concerns (such as commercial buildings, schools, apartments, etc.).

UNCE's Radon Education Program offers educational programs and literature to Nevadans to educate citizens about the radon health risk. For more information, visit the UNCE web site, www.unce.unr.edu/radon. If your group would like a program presentation, please contact Megan Long at the Radon Hot Line, 1-888-RADON10 to reserve a date.