



October 17, 2009

Simple, inexpensive kit measures whether your home is at risk for the gas

*By Susan H. Howe
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension*

Fall is the perfect time to test your home for radon gas.

Radon is a colorless, odorless carcinogenic gas that emanates naturally from the ground. It enters a home through foundation cracks, plumbing and utility openings, and becomes a health risk when trapped inside. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates 21,000 people in the U.S. die each year from lung cancer caused by radon exposure -- more than those who die from secondhand smoke, drunken driving, falls in the home, drowning or home fires.

The only way to know if your home exceeds the recommended EPA radon "action level" of four picoCuries per liter of air is to have your home tested. A short-term test involves setting out an inexpensive kit in your home for three days, then sending it to a testing lab in a postage-paid, pre-addressed envelope that comes with the kit. If the short-term test shows elevated levels of radon, the homeowner should conduct a confirming test to verify initial results. If elevated levels are confirmed, homeowners are encouraged to hire a certified radon contractor to install a relatively inexpensive radon reduction system to correct the problem.

Fall and winter are the best times to test for radon because it's more likely that windows in your home will be closed. The short-term test is a screening test to simulate closed-house conditions. Drafts or significant fresh air circulation can interfere with the intended test results.

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.

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Radon Education Program is signaling the start of testing season by recognizing Oct. 18-24 as Radon Action Week.

UNCE's Radon Education Program also offers educational programs and literature to Nevadans to educate them 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 or if you have any questions, contact Megan Long at the Radon Hot Line, 888-723-6610 to reserve a date.

Since September 2007, UNCE -- working with the Nevada State Health Division -- has distributed more than 11,500 radon kits. The results of tests conducted with those kits have given us a better picture of radon's presence in Nevada than ever before. With some counties showing a high rate of elevated radon, including Pershing County, where 60 percent of the tests conducted showed elevated levels, and Douglas County, where 40 percent of the homes had elevated levels, program officials are hoping even more homeowners will have their homes tested.

The data from more than 5,268 tests show that homes in 14 of Nevada's 17 counties have greater than a 10 percent probability of having elevated levels of radon, and that 25.2 percent of all homes tested have levels higher than the action level established by the EPA.

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, such as commercial buildings, schools and apartments, can also have radon concerns. There's no way to predict which homes will have high radon levels. Neighboring homes can have very different radon levels. A few variables that determine radon levels include how the

home was constructed, lifestyle factors, and the strength of the radon source near the house.

Susan H. Howe is program director for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's radon education program.

Additional Facts

GET A FREE TEST KIT

Washoe and Douglas county residents can receive a free test kit by going to the Washoe County Cooperative Extension Office at 5305 Mill St., or the Douglas County Cooperative Extension Office at 1329 Waterloo in Gardnerville. Washoe and Douglas residents can also receive a free test kit by mail by calling the Radon Hot Line at 1-888-723-6610 to request a kit.

UNCE's Radon Education Program offers tests for \$5 in most other Cooperative Extension offices in the state. The kit includes postage and an analysis report.

Residents of other Nevada counties can receive a test kit by visiting their Cooperative Extension office or by mailing a \$7.50 check (\$5 per kit and \$2.50 for shipping and handling) made out to Board of Regents to the Washoe County Extension Office at 5305 Mill St., Reno, 89502.
