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## Few people realize risk of radon

*By Susan Howe*

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Although many people are aware that smoking causes lung cancer, hardly anyone seems to know that breathing the air in their home can also cause lung cancer.

In fact, radon gas in buildings is the leading cause of lung cancer for nonsmokers, killing more people than secondhand smoke, drunken driving, falls in the home, drowning or home fires.

Radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas, is present in elevated concentrations in many homes and buildings, yet few people know about the radon risk or have their homes tested for it.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates 21,000 Americans die each year from lung cancer caused by indoor radon exposure.

An estimated one out of every 15 homes in the U.S. has radon levels at or above the EPA action level of 4 picoCuries per liter of air (pCi/l). In Nevada, in past radon surveys, one out of every five homes was determined to have elevated radon levels. However, as more homes have been tested through the Nevada Radon Education Program, the radon potential has increased.

With more than 5,394 usable radon test results since September 2003, elevated radon levels have been found in one out of every four homes tested in Nevada. The highest radon potential is in Carson City, Douglas, Elko, Humboldt, Lander, Lincoln, Lyon, Mineral, Pershing, Washoe and White Pine counties. Sample sizes have been too small for Esmeralda, Eureka, and Storey counties to draw any conclusion about radon potential, but elevated radon levels have also been found in these counties.

"As more homes are tested, we are seeing the radon potential increase in more counties," said Eric Matus, radiological staff specialist, Nevada State Health Division. "Based on data and radon epidemiology, we highly recommend that every home in the state should be tested."

In an effort to educate people about indoor radon exposure, January has been proclaimed National Radon Action Month, and state radon programs are making efforts to make this health risk known and to encourage people to take action by having their homes tested. University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Radon Education Program and the Nevada State Health Division urge all Nevadans to get their homes tested for radon.

The Cooperative Extension also plans to have displays in area facilities, as well as other activities to alert Nevadans about the radon health risk. Attendees who arrive early at the Summit Sierra and the Sparks 14 movie theaters through Jan. 22 will see a 30-second EPA radon public service announcement during the preshow.

Cooperative Extension's communications office has also produced a video explaining how easy it is to test your home for radon. The video can be viewed at [www.youtube.com/UNRExtension](http://www.youtube.com/UNRExtension).

In addition, Grand Sierra Resort in Reno, Pioneer Crossing Casino in Fernley and the Red Lion Hotel and Casino in Elko have offered to display radon information on their marquees during January. Some area residents can also receive notices on their front door with a free test-kit coupon and information

about radon in new efforts to inform area homeowners.

Where does it

come from?

Radon comes from the natural decay of uranium and is found in soil, rocks and water. While radon can enter the home through the use of groundwater, it is typically not the major source of radon concentrations in a home. The major source of radon comes from the soil beneath a home, entering through foundation cracks, plumbing and utility openings and some of the porous materials used to construct foundations and floors. You can't see, smell or taste it, but radon gas can accumulate to harmful levels when trapped indoors.

Radon can enter any home, old or new, well-sealed or drafty. Even homes with basements, slab on grade, crawl spaces or no visible foundation cracks are susceptible.

"You can't predict which homes will have high radon levels," Matus said. "Two neighboring homes can have very different radon levels. Variables that determine radon levels include how the home was constructed, lifestyle factors and the strength of the radon source beneath the house. The only way to know a building's radon levels is to test."

Recognizing the health risk and the fact that winter is the best time to test your home for radon, Republican Gov. Jim Gibbons has also declared January as National Radon Action Month.

"January is an ideal time to test a home for radon," Matus said. "When a home is closed up during cooler weather months, radon concentrations increase."

The Cooperative Extension offers radon test kits at most extension offices across the state. Some counties offer free test kits as a service to their residents, paid for by the extension office in those counties.

Susan Howe is program director for the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Radon Education Program.

## Additional Facts

Radon test kits

Free kits: As part of Radon Action Month, free radon test kits are offered at program presentations put on statewide throughout the month. In Reno, five programs are being offered in conjunction with Washoe County libraries:

- 11 a.m. today, Sierra View Library, 4001 S. Virginia St.
- 3 p.m. today, South Valleys Library, 15650 Wedge Parkway.
- 6 p.m. Tuesday, Incline Village Library, 845 Alder Ave., Incline Village
- 4 p.m. Jan. 21, Spanish Springs Library, 7100A Pyramid Highway.
- Noon Jan. 23, North Valleys Library, 1075 North Hills Blvd.

Other places to Get a kit: To find out where to get a test kit or for more information, visit the Nevada Radon Education Program Web site, [www.unce.unr.edu/radon](http://www.unce.unr.edu/radon), or call the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, 888-723-6610. For a shipping fee, you can also receive a test kit by mail.

More information: Contact the Nevada State Health Division at 775 687-7531 or 775 687-7536.

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