

GREEN



PHOTO/SAGE LEEHEY

Jamie Roice-Gomes shows a radon test kit and a map of radon levels in tested homes in Washoe County.

Silent but deadly

Free test kits for cancer-causing radon gas are available in Nevada

Radon being colorless, odorless, tasteless, naturally occurring and the second leading cause of lung cancer sounds a little terrifying, but testing the exposure levels in your home is pretty easy.

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All it takes is a simple test kit that's free from now until Feb. 28 at all University of Nevada Cooperative Extension offices as part of National Radon Action Month. The test kit just needs to be placed on the lowest lived-in area of your home and left for three days. Then you send it off to the lab in the supplied prepaid mailer. In about a week and a half to two weeks, you'll find out the radon level in your home. Just make sure to send the kit immediately after completing the test because it's time sensitive. About one in four homes that have been tested in Nevada have had elevated radon levels.

"Every home, every building has radon, but we really care about the level," said UNCE radon education coordinator Jamie Roice-Gomes. "The EPA says that if your home is at four picocuries per liter of air ... you should take some sort of action to fix it. Let me put this into perspective. When there is an average of four picocuries [of radon] per liter of air, then that means there's a similar risk to developing lung cancer as someone who smokes about half a pack of cigarettes a day."

And with lung cancer being the leading cause of cancer death and the second most common cancer in the United States, it seems silly not to test your home for radon.

"Radon levels, they constantly fluctuate—year to year, seasonally, monthly, weekly, daily, even hourly levels can go up and down," Roice-Gomes said. "So it's recommended that homes are tested every two years."

UNCE is pushing for homes to be tested but Roice-Gomes said testing other places, like businesses and schools, is less necessary because it takes long term exposure—about 10 to 20 years, according to Roice-Gomes—to cause lung cancer, and less time is typically spent in those places than in your home. She also said the best time to test is during the wintertime when radon levels are at their highest and that the kits are safe around kids and pets.

"Basically, it takes an air sample and the radioactive particles end up adhering to the activated charcoal," she said. "These are non-hazardous as well. It's OK to be around your kids. Just don't have them disturb it while it's testing."

If you've tested and have elevated radon levels—anything at or above four picocuries per liter of air—mitigation is also relatively simple and easy. You can do it yourself or you can go to a certified radon mitigator.

"And it depends on what type of foundation you have," Roice-Gomes said. "If you have a crawl space, they end up putting down a polyethylene sheeting down—just a plastic sheeting down—and they seal it with a polyurethane caulking. ... There's a perforated pipe hooked up to a piping system with an exhaust vent at the end, and it sucks all the radon and soil gas from underneath it, lowering levels. For a house that has a concrete slab, they would end up drilling a hole three or four inches in diameter into the concrete slab, hooking it up to a piping system with an exhaust vent at the end that runs continuously again, and it sucks all that radon and soil gas out."

Without testing, there's no way to know or even guess that you have elevated radon levels in your home, so Roice-Gomes urged that Nevadans take advantage of the free test kits and find out if their homes are safe. □

For a list of University of Nevada Cooperative Extension offices, visit tinyurl.com/3en4s4f. For more about radon, visit www.unce.unr.edu/programs/sites/radon.