

## **Radon may be in your home. Do you know your risk?**

Did you know that you could be breathing in radon gas right now as you read the paper? Have you ever wondered how much radon gas you are breathing in at home? Have you ever tested your home for radon gas? January is Radon Action month. This is a great time to learn more about radon gas and what you can do to reduce your risk of exposure.

According to the Nebraska Cancer Registry, 4,491 Nebraskans died of lung cancer in the 5-year period of 2009-2013. Not all of these individuals were smokers or exposed to second hand smoke. Some of these deaths may be attributed to elevated radon levels. Did you know that radon exposure is the second leading cause of lung cancer?

Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about radon:

**What is radon?** Radon is a highly toxic radioactive gas—you can't see it, smell it, or taste it. Unless you test for it, you can't know whether you have toxic levels in your home. Radon gas is produced by the natural decay of radium found in rocks and soils. In outdoor air, radon becomes diluted enough that it is relatively harmless. However, the gas can move through the soil and tends to accumulate in closed spaces, like basements. It enters buildings and homes from the soil beneath through cracks and holes in the foundation.

**Is radon present in Nebraska?** Yes, during the past ten years, over 1,000 homes in Adams County have been tested. The majority have resulted in levels above the action level of 4 picocuries (pronounced peek-o-kyurees) per liter of air. Over 100 homes tested in each of the three other counties (Clay, Nuckolls and Webster) also show a majority with radon levels greater than 4 picocuries per liter.

In the past few years, some homes in the South Heartland district have tested in the very high range of 19.1 – 108.7 picocuries per liter. This means those residents are at risk and should consider taking further steps to assess and address the elevated radon levels in their homes.

**Who is at risk?** Everyone is at risk. The EPA estimates that radon causes about 21,000 lung cancer deaths each year in the United States. Cancer caused by radon would usually occur many years (5-25) after exposure. Some people may be at higher risk because of long-term exposure to radon. Children may be at higher risk because their lungs are still developing and the sensitive tissues are more easily damaged. And smokers are at higher risk because of an interactive relationship between radon and smoking.

**How do I find out if I have a radon problem in my home?** Short term tests are the most popular way to obtain initial results. Close all doors and windows, and turn off fans that bring in outside air. The kit should be placed at the lowest living level of your home in a room that is frequently used although not a kitchen or bathroom. Place it on a surface at least 20 inches above the floor and away from drafts, away from areas with high heat or humidity, and away from exterior walls. Follow instructions on the kit to determine how many days to leave it in place; short term kits can require from 2-90 days.

Beginning in January, during Radon Action Month, South Heartland District Health Department will be distributing short term test kits for \$7.00 at 606 N. Minnesota in Hastings and from SHDHD satellite office sites in Clay, Nuckolls, and Webster Counties. Kits will also be available at the UNL County Extension offices in Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties.

**Can I test for radon during a real estate transaction?** Requesting testing during a real estate transaction will allow buyers to know if the home they are interested in purchasing has elevated radon. The home seller can test for radon before putting the house on the market to ensure that it has safe levels to attract potential buyers. The buyer can request a radon test during the home inspection period. If high levels of radon are present, mitigating it can be handled during the home sale similar to other required home repairs.

**Where can I find more information?**

For links to more information on radon, radon testing, local radon test results and radon reduction methods, please visit the South Heartland District Health Department website at [www.southheartlandhealth.org](http://www.southheartlandhealth.org) or call: 402-462-6211 or toll free at 1-877-238-7595.

*Jessica Warner is the Health Surveillance Coordinator at South Heartland District Health Department. She may be reached at 402-462-6211 or toll free at 877-238-7595.*