

Healthy Indoor Air Series

Radon

What is radon?

Radon is an indoor pollutant—a colorless, odorless, radioactive gas that results naturally from the decay of uranium and radium. Uranium is naturally present in the soil.

Where is radon found?

Every home has the potential for elevated levels of radon. It is not usually a question of “Is there radon?” but rather, “How much radon is there?” As warm air rises and leaves through openings in the roof, air seeps in from the soil around and under the house.

Soil gasses, such as radon, enter through cracks in the foundation floor and walls, hollow-block walls, and openings around floor drains, pipes, and sump pumps. These gasses can enter the home when the air pressure inside the home is less than outside.

How do I know if my house has elevated levels of radon?

The only way to know if you have radon in your home is to test for it. In 2005, the Office of the Surgeon General advised that radon presents a significant health risk to families.

A short-term test of two to seven days will indicate the radon level in your home. Simply place a radon detector in a designated area. After the prescribed number of days, seal the detector and mail it to a lab.

Long-term tests of three months to one year give the best indication of the yearly average of the radon level in the home. Test kits are available at some public health departments, retail stores, and through the mail. The Illinois Emergency Management Agency has a list of reputable companies that sell radon detectors.

For real estate transactions, it is recommended to hire a professional who is licensed with the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) to test for radon.

There are 21,000 estimated lung cancer deaths each year due to radon.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

What are the health effects of radon?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that “radon is believed to be the second leading cause of lung cancer in America, second only to smoking.” For non-smokers, radon is the leading cause of lung cancer.

Radon can be inhaled into the lungs, where it undergoes radioactive decay. As it decays, radon releases tiny bursts of energy called alpha particles, which can harm lung tissue by damaging the DNA. Damaged DNA can lead to lung cancer. The problem is that the cancer may not be diagnosed for many years. However, not everyone exposed to elevated levels of radon will develop lung cancer.

How is radon measured?

Radon is measured in picoCuries per liter of air (pCi/L), a measurement of radioactivity. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that homes with radon levels of 4 or more pCi/L be fixed.

The indoor radon average nationwide is 1.3 pCi/L. The average outside air in Illinois has a level of 0.6 pCi/L.

When should I test for radon?

You can test for radon any time during the year. Follow the directions that come with the detector. Remember to close exterior windows and doors for 12 hours before doing the short-term test. Keep the house closed and fans turned off until the test is finished. When you're finished, mail in the detector. Test results will usually be sent to you within 2 weeks. It is safe to enter and exit the home while you are doing the test.

What do the results mean?

If the test results show less than 4 pCi/L of radon, nothing needs to be done. Test again in 2 years. If the radon level is between 4 to 8 pCi/L, test again with a long-term test using an alpha track detector for 3 months to a year.

If you have 4 or more pCi/L of radon after the second test, contact a licensed professional mitigator to determine how to remove the radon. A list of licensed professionals is available on the IEMA website, www.radon.illinois.gov.

A depressurization system may need to be installed in the basement, crawl space, or under a slab on grade foundation. The cost ranges from \$500 to \$2500 for the system.

Enter the national radon poster contest for 9-14 yr old children. Contest information is on this website: www.TakeActionOnRadon.illinois.edu. Click on Teacher Resources: Win a trip to Washington DC. IL entries due March 1, 2010

While the depressurization system is being installed, the professional mitigator should seal the cracks and openings in the foundation or basement walls and floor. A follow-up test should be performed to ensure radon levels were reduced.

Can I prevent radon pollution during new home construction?

The builder can install a passive radon-reduction system while the house is under construction at a cost of about \$350 to \$500. Once the home is completely finished, test for radon. If there is a high level of radon, a licensed mitigator can install a special fan in the attic and attach it to a pipe from the passive radon reduction system. The fan will pull radon and other soil gasses from under the house and out the pipe. Test the home for radon every 2 years to make sure the system is working.

For more information

Contact your local U of I Extension office or visit these web sites:

University of Illinois Extension
<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/healthyair/>

www.TakeActionOnRadon.illinois.edu
<http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/regions/SIfamily>

Healthy Indoor Air for America's Homes

www.healthyindoorair.org

Illinois Emergency Management Agency
(1-800-325-1245)

www.radon.illinois.gov

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