

Radon is an invisible threat—but it can be resolved

The threats we face in our homes often are quite visible—tornadoes, flooding, fire—yet an especially dangerous threat here in El Paso County is invisible, odorless and tasteless. That threat is radon, a cancer-causing gas. The good news is, radon is easily detected with an inexpensive and easy-to-use test kit, and radon is a problem that is fairly inexpensive to reduce or eliminate.

January is national Radon Action Month, and educating the public about radon is one of the important tasks performed by our Air Quality program at the Health Department. Let me share some information with you.

First, as I mentioned, radon is an invisible threat. Radon occurs naturally in the environment, resulting from the decay of uranium, which is radioactive. Radon is known to cause cancer in people who have exposure to it over a period of years. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Assessment of Risks from Radon in Homes report, approximately 21,000 people die in the United States each year from illness associated with radon. For people who don't smoke, radon is the leading cause of lung cancer. And for people who do smoke, radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking.

People come into contact with radon because the gas can accumulate to dangerous levels in buildings, including homes. By virtue of our rocky environment, El Paso County and most other counties in Colorado are rated by EPA as being at high risk for radon exposure. In El Paso County, nearly 45 percent of the 6,421 radon tests performed by local residents showed results at or above the EPA radon action level, meaning intervention is strongly recommended. (data from radon test kit manufacturer, Air Chek Inc., 1987-2007).

Fortunately, screening for excessive radon exposure through testing is simple and inexpensive. Test kits are inexpensive (usually \$10 or less), easy to use and available from a variety of sources, including home improvement stores. If elevated levels of radon are found, some simple solutions can be implemented, such as ventilating crawlspaces under a home. However, often a system to reduce radon is needed from a professional service contractor. The cost of a system to reduce radon depends on when the home was built, the extent of the radon level and how the system needs to look for aesthetic purposes. All contractors involved in radon-related projects should meet National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) certification requirements.

So who needs to be aware of the risks and resolutions for radon? All of our county residents need to know, particularly anyone involved in the selling or buying of a home.

That's true for buyers, sellers and real estate professionals because laws exist that require disclosure of known radon status. Also, the process of buying a home provides a good opportunity to assess and resolve radon problems. The cost to reduce or eliminate radon from an existing home can range from \$800 to \$2,500, with the average cost about \$1,200. When you think about all of the costs associated with home buying, the cost to reduce/eliminate an invisible gas that can cause cancer seems like a small price to pay.

These days, more and more home builders are building radon systems into new homes, which can reduce the cost considerably. Using radon-resistant construction methods is an emerging area in homebuilding, and if you're having a home built, it's worth talking to your builder about radon up front.

Ultimately, the most important thing to remember is that while radon is dangerous at certain levels, there are ways to prevent and reduce risk that are easy and affordable. For more information, visit www.elpasocountyhealth.org.

For basic radon test kits:

- Call the Colorado Radon Hotline (800) 846-3986.

Source: The New Falcon Herald, January 2008