



Radon is a Serious Health Hazard in South Central Nebraska

What is something you cannot see, taste, or smell AND it is the number one cause of lung cancer in non-smokers in the United States? The answer is radon!

Radon is a colorless, odorless, and tasteless radioactive gas. It can affect the air we breathe and, to a lesser extent, the water we drink. Radon forms naturally from the decay (breaking down) of radioactive elements, such as uranium, in the soil and rocks in our area.

Breathing air with radon can cause changes in the tissues in a person's lungs, which can lead to lung cancer. In fact, radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer after smoking and it claims about 20,000 lives each year in the U.S. Also, if you smoke and your home has high radon levels, your risk of lung cancer is especially high.

With January being National Radon Action Month, South Heartland staff are working to raise awareness of radon risks because our region of the country has high radon potential – meaning the type of rocks and soils we have here are a source of radon - and we want residents to know that radon exposure is a *preventable* health risk.

How does radon get into our homes? Radon enters buildings and homes from the soil beneath, through cracks and holes in the foundation. Your home traps radon inside, where it can build up. Any home can have a radon problem – new homes, old homes, drafty homes and well-sealed homes, homes that have basements and those that do not. Radon gas can be present throughout your house, but is usually at higher concentrations in the lower-level closed spaces, like basements. Unless you test for radon in your home, there is no way to know how much radon is in the air you are breathing.

Be in the know: radon is a serious health hazard in Nebraska. In fact, more than half of radon tests done in Nebraska have results above the level considered by the EPA to be High – called the *action level*. This is also true in South Heartland's 4 counties (Adams, Clay, Nuckolls, Webster), where 57% of the results from homes tested last year were above the action level.

The results are a measure of the amount of radioactive gas per liter of air, in picocuries per liter (pCi/L), and the action level is 4 pCi/L or higher. The highest test result last year for South Heartland health district was 17.9 pCi/L – almost 4.5X higher than the action level. The highest level ever reported for the South Heartland district was 63.4 pCi/L in 2011 – almost 16X higher than the action level.

How can you find out if you have a radon problem in your home? Short-term tests are the most popular and low-cost way to obtain initial results and the process is simple. Close all doors and windows, and turn off fans that bring in outside air. Plan to test the lowest living level of your home, in a room that is frequently used, although not a kitchen or bathroom. Follow the specific kit instructions for how to place or hang the kit away from drafts, away from areas with high heat or humidity, and away from exterior walls. You will need to follow the instructions on the kit to determine how many days to leave it in place; short term kits can require from 2-90 days, depending on the type of test kit. The next step is to mail the kit to the testing lab where the kit will be processed and the result sent back to you.

If your radon level is at or above the action level, you can fix your home to reduce the radon levels. Radon reduction systems work and they are not too costly. Some radon reduction systems can reduce radon levels in your home by up to 99%. Even very high levels can be reduced to acceptable levels. There are qualified radon mitigation businesses licensed with the State of Nebraska that can install a radon reduction system for you.

Are you planning on buying or selling your home? Requesting testing during a real estate transaction will allow buyers to know if the home they are interested in purchasing has elevated radon. Although not required by law, 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.

South Heartland District Health Department has short term test kits available for \$8.00 at our office at 606 N. Minnesota in Hastings. We also have kits available for purchase at the UNL County Extension offices in Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties and the public library in Superior.

Radon is a health risk you can prevent! If you haven't already tested, or it has been 2-3 years since you've tested, make it one of your New Year's resolutions to test your home for radon in January, during Radon Action month.

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.ne.gov or call: 402-462-6211 or toll free at 1-877-238-7595.

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