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(Neb.)-Nebraska Continues To Have High Levels of Radon In Homes



By: Roxie Graham-Marski Posted at: 01/21/2013 11:58 AM

(PANHANDLE)-Radon testing in Nebraska continues to indicate that a high level of radon gas is being found in homes throughout the state. Of over 48,000 homes tested since 1990, 59 percent have been above the acceptable health level set by the Environmental Protection Agency, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Radon is a colorless, odorless, naturally occurring gas that originates in the soil and is harmless when dispersed in outdoor air. However, "when trapped in buildings, it can be (come) harmful at elevated levels and is the second leading cause of lung cancer in smokers, and the leading cause of lung cancer in non smokers," says Environmental Health Coordinator Tabi Prochazka for the Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD).

Since it is radioactive, radon is very damaging to lung tissue when breathed in. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) estimates that approximately 21,000 lung cancer deaths per year are due to radon exposure.

"Houses next to each other can have very different radon levels," says Prochazka. "Elevated radon levels are found in new and old houses, well-sealed and drafty houses, houses with or without basements, and houses with every kind of furnace. The only way to know if your home has dangerous levels of radon is to test it."

The EPA-set health standard for radon is 4 picocuries per liter of air, although exposure to even lower levels can raise a person's risk. A recent analysis of radon data shows:

--As more homes in Nebraska are tested for radon, the state average is creeping higher, up to 6.3 picocuries per liter from 5.9 picocuries per liter in 2010.

--The average radon level in some counties has increased to above 4.0 picocuries per liter, with Sheridan, Garden, and Holt counties joining the 69 counties that tested that high previously.

--Dawson and Gage counties have joined Cedar County in the category of having an extremely high level. These counties have results in the 205-290 picocuries per liter category.

Indoor Air Quality Program Manager Sara Morgan says, "The data supports what we've known for some time. Nebraska homes are very likely to have high levels of radon." Chief Medical Officer Dr. Joann Schaefer says, "People should reduce their risk as much as possible. Radon testing is the first step to knowing how much risk you and your family are exposed to in your home. If you have a high level, you can take measures to reduce it."

Prochazka says, "One in every two homes in Nebraska has an elevated radon level, and yours could be one of them."

Fortunately, there are simple solutions to lower elevated levels of radon in homes.

Sealing obvious cracks and openings in the foundation of the home can slow radon entry, as can pressurizing the basement by opening air registers. However, since these steps will only lower the radon level slightly, contacting a licensed contractor will be the next step for most homes with higher levels. The contractor can install a permanent mitigation system that will actively pull the radon from under the foundation slab and exhaust it above the roof.

January is National Radon Action Month, and PPHD is kicking off a radon test kit contest in area schools, as well as businesses belonging to the Panhandle Worksite Wellness Council. PPHD reps will also be at area health fairs to draw attention to radon as a serious public health issue and, more importantly, to motivate Panhandle residents to take action to protect themselves and their families from the negative health risks posed by radon by testing their homes.

On the Nebraska Radon Program website, new maps show radon averages across the state, as well as how many homes have been tested, and the percentage of homes that test high. “The maps are not a predictor of what radon level an individual home will have,” Morgan said. “Even counties with low averages have some homes with high radon levels. Likewise, some high average counties have homes with low radon levels. Your neighbor’s radon level is not an indication of what your radon level will be, so each homeowner needs to test.”

To see the new summary data and maps showing areas in the state with high radon levels, visit <http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/radon>. This page will also have information on how to get a radon test kit and a list of contractors who are licensed to mitigate radon levels in homes.

For residents living in the Nebraska Panhandle, free short-term radon test kits are available by contacting Prochazka at 308-487-3600, ext. 107 or toll-free at 866-701-7173, ext. 107. She can also be e-mailed at tprochazka@pphd.org. Office manager Sara Sulzbach says short-term test kits take approximately three to seven days. The kit then is mailed to a laboratory, which reports back its findings. If the test comes back positive for high levels of radon, Sulzbach says the PPHD recommends a long-term test, which takes approximately three months to a year, before mitigation efforts. Sulzbach says a mitigation system is much easier and cheaper to install in a new home as it is being constructed than it is to add later.

For additional information about radon visit www.pphd.org/radon.html. The purpose of the Panhandle Public Health District is to educate the region it serves about the prevention of epidemics, spread of contagious diseases, injury, illness and disability. Through education, protection and promotion of these issues, the PPHD believes the quality of life of the residents they serve can be greatly improved.

Stay tuned to Stereo Am 610 during the second half of the 4 o'clock hour for Community Focus this Tuesday (January 22nd). Our guest will be Tabi Prochazka with Panhandle Public Health.

(Questions? Comments? E-mail roxie@chadrad.com.)

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