

Radon, 'silent killer,' found in area homes

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

Radon is an odorless, colorless, tasteless gas. It's also a potential killer. It could be in many Oakland County homes.

It's natural, not the product of a man-made disaster.

Nearly every American is at risk of radon exposure, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. And nearly everyone exposed to radon on a continuing basis is at risk of developing lung cancer.

That's the scary news. The encouraging news is that radon exposure can easily be reduced or prevented.

RADON COMES from the ground. It is a radioactive gas formed naturally when radium breaks down.

Radon seeps into homes through cracks in basements and foundation slabs, through or openings for sump pumps and drains.

Ultimately, radon is the third step in the natural decay of uranium. Because of the radioactivity involved, radon exposure has been linked to the nation's rise in lung cancer, particularly the rising cancer rate among non-smokers.

Radon is commonly found in Michigan soil.

"WE USED to think it was a 'mining country' problem — Pennsylvania and maybe the UP," said Alex Johnson, a spokesman for the American Lung Association, Southfield. "We don't think that anymore. In fact, we encourage everyone to test for radon."

It is estimated radon could be found in as many as one out of every five Oakland County houses and as many as one in 10 in Wayne County.

Though testing is far from complete, varying traces of radon have been discovered in nearly 900 houses

in the section of Oakland County stretching southwest from Birmingham to Farmington — and 400 more in Novi alone — according to the local lung association office.

RADON CAN be easily and inexpensively detected and remedied. But unless tests are done, there's no way of knowing whether or to what degree radon is present in a house.

Exposure to heavily diluted radon in the outdoor air could produce a radiation level equal to 20 chest X-rays per year, according to the EPA.

Exposure is measured in picocuries, a commonly accepted measure of radiation.

ACCORDING TO EPA studies, radon generally can't be reduced below 4 picocuries per liter of air once it seeps into a home.

"It's not as if it's impossible to reduce below that level, but it becomes a terrific expense to do so," said radon expert Les Johnson of the EPA regional office in Chicago.

"There is a great deal of confusion about that number. It doesn't have to be that level in basements, for instance, but it should at least be that level in living rooms."

Even at the 4 pCi per liter level, those exposed could run a risk of developing lung cancer up to five times greater than that of a normal non-smoker.

Exposure at levels above 20 pCi per liter is equivalent to a two-pack-a-day cigarette habit for non-smokers. Levels that high have already been found among houses in the Livonia, West Bloomfield and Farmington areas.

For smokers, high-level exposure can be even more devastating. "When you add that to smoking, it's another factor, we know the result doesn't add to the risk; it multiplies the risk," the lung association's Johnson said.

Left unchecked, continued radon exposure is almost certainly fatal. Lung cancer, the fastest growing type of cancer, causes 115,000 deaths one of the lowest survival rates.

American Lung Association experts say 95 percent of all lung cancer patients will die within five years once cancer has been detected.

New houses are no safer from radon exposure than are old ones, he said. Nor are houses with radon-free neighbors. "There's really no pattern," Alex Johnson said.

ADVANCE SOIL testing is almost worthless, experts believe, because radon levels in the ground don't necessarily correspond to those in houses.

The highest level recorded in the U.S., over 2,000 pCi per liter, was found in a new house occupied by a Pennsylvania man whose body contained so much radiation that it tripped the warning system of the nuclear power plant where he worked.

That man's story, revealed in 1985, helped turn radon into a national issue. But nearly four years before that, researchers were examining radon exposure as a possible explanation for the rise in non-smoker lung cancer.

Most likely to produce radon are soils containing uranium, or granite and shale, or soil exposed to certain industrial wastes.

Everyone should test for radon, lung association specialists said, except those who live above the second floor in an apartment building.

"People with homes, whether over a basement, slab or crawlspace, should test," Johnson said. "People who live on first or second floor of an apartment building, or in mobile homes on a permanent foundation should also test."

TWO SIMPLE, accurate tests can be conducted by the average homeowner.

The least expensive is called the charcoal canister test. Canisters generally cost \$10-\$25 at hardware stores, through specialized dealers or through the lung association itself. Some municipalities, including Novi, also sell them at city hall.

Canisters, resembling sifting pans used by long-ago gold miners, can be placed in basements or first floor living rooms for three to seven days. Experts say they're a good way to detect whether radon is present.

"What people need to realize, though, is that the reading is that of the last day the canister was there," the EPA's Johnson said. "The average level could be higher or lower than that."

THE SECOND kind is the alpha track detectors. It costs more, \$20-\$50, but can test for up to a year, if necessary, in determining average radon levels in a home.

Test results can generally be sent to the agency selling the canisters or alpha track detectors for verification. A second test may be necessary if radon is detected by either method.

PATCHING CRACKS and adding sump pump vents could be all that is necessary to reduce radon levels, experts said.

More elaborate methods, including pressurizing or depressurizing a house, are suggested in an EPA booklet on radon reduction. (The booklet is available by writing the regional EPA office: 230 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill. 60604. Copies may also be reserved by calling 312-353-2072.)

REPAIRS NEED not be costly.

EPA recommends seriously questioning a contractor whose bid comes in well above \$1,500 for most methods.

Repairs are at the homeowners' expense. There's no government assistance program. Tax credits have been discussed in some states.

Building code changes are recommended for home builders to eliminate radon as a future threat.

"We know radon can be 'built out' of homes if the proper guidelines are followed," Johnson said.

A report on radon has been given to Gov. James Blanchard for review, Johnson said, and should be available soon.

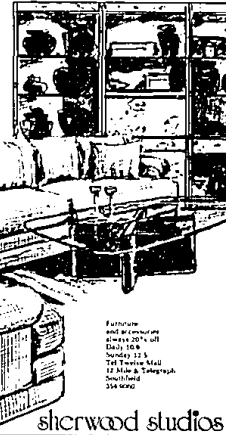
From there, legislators may take action, as they have in New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Changes in the state building code, regulations for those in the radon-testing business, as well as a law requiring testing in public buildings, could be a result of the report's publication.

A radon center has already been established on the University of Michigan's main Ann Arbor campus. The center is designed to train professionals in radon dangers and remedies.

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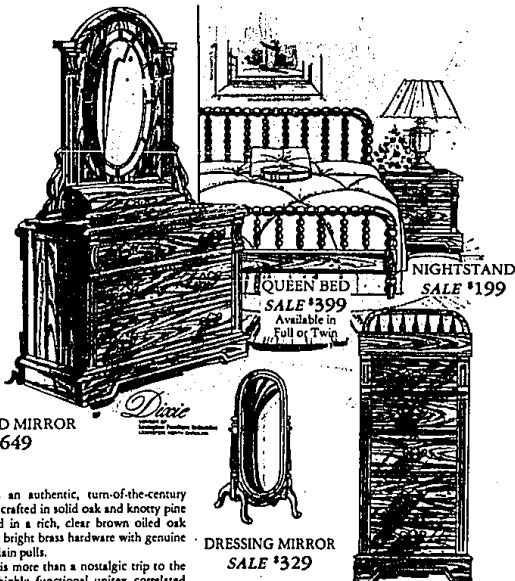
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