

Radon — "serious hazard"

It is a colorless, odorless, radioactive gas that will be responsible for 8,000 to 20,000 lung cancer deaths in the United States this year — and it has found its way into homes across the nation. It is radon.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, radon is extremely dangerous after prolonged exposure. Limited studies have indicated that as many as 12 percent of U.S. homes have radon levels above the EPA standard.

The American Lung Association — the Christmas Seal People — has cited radon gas as a serious environmental problem as health-threatening levels of the gas are found in more and more homes.

In Michigan, the EPA has diagnosed a definite radon problem. Radon levels above the EPA safety levels were found in about 10 percent of the 348 homes tested in 1986. Other surveys have also concluded that Michigan homes on the average measure higher in radon exposure than the national average (2.2 picocuries of radon per liter of air higher).

The EPA limit for radon exposure is 4 picocuries per liter of air which is equivalent to 200 chest X-rays per year. Any reading above this level has been deemed a health hazard.

Aging agency sets hearing

The Area Agency on Aging Region 1-B will conduct a public hearing on its proposed annual implementation plan for fiscal year 1988.

Region 1-B services older adult residents of Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair and Washtenaw counties. AAA 1-B is the organization responsible for planning, developing and coordinating services for older adults in these counties.

Designated by the state, AAA 1-B is a part of the federal aging network administered by the Administration on Aging, Department of Health and Human Services.

The public hearing will be 1-3 p.m. Tuesday, March 17, at the Southfield Senior Center, 24350 Civic Center Drive, Southfield.

The public is invited. Comments received will assist the AAA 1-B in finalizing its planning and funding priorities.

Copies of the proposed annual implementation plan will be available March 3 in Oakland County at Oakland Livingston Humphreys Agency, 186 Oakland Avenue, Pontiac, 48351-5164.

WHAT MAKES this potentially lethal gas an alarming indoor problem is that its hazardous health effects are magnified in an enclosed area. Radon, when trapped indoors, can easily rise above the acceptable EPA levels for radon gas exposure.

Radon is formed when uranium in the earth's soil, water and underlying deposits of granite, phosphate and shale naturally decays. It emits into the atmosphere and then breaks down into radioactive "alpha" particles. These isotopes then attach themselves to dust particles in the air which are inhaled into the lungs where they are lodged permanently and can cause tissue damage.

Radon gas seeps into homes through cracks in concrete foundations, slack fittings between foundations and walls, loose seals around sewer or gas pipes entering basements and home crawl spaces. It also has been found to emit from building materials used in home construction including gypsum board, granite and concrete.

Once radon is inside an enclosed area, such as a home, it can accumulate to high levels. Indoor levels depend both on a building's construction and the concentration of radon in the underlying soil.

Homeowners can also contribute to high radon gas levels by making their homes energy efficient. Added seals around the windows, doors and fireplaces cut down on the natural ventilation process of a home and the gas has nowhere to dissipate and disperse but indoors.

THERE ARE steps that can be taken to cut down on radon intake.

- Spend less time in areas with

higher concentrations of radon, such as the basement.

- Whenever practical, open all windows and turn fans to increase ventilation through the house. This is extremely important in the basement.

- Homeowners with crawl spaces should keep the walls on all sides of the house fully open all year.

- The Lung Association urges that you quit smoking and discourage smoking in your home. The combined effects of smoke and radon are a deadly mixture that can cause lung damage and eventually lung cancer. By doing this, you reduce your whole family's chance of developing lung disease.

- If possible, seal the penetration points of the gas with a non-porous, non-cracking material.

MICHIGAN HOMES will soon be tested as part of a 10-state study. This testing has been ordered as a result of preliminary EPA tests which indicate that Michigan has a radon problem. Although Michigan levels are above safety guidelines, they are still low compared to some Eastern states.

Concerned residents that wish to have their homes tested for radon or want more information about radon can contact either The Michigan Department of Public Health, Division of Radiological Health, 3300 N. Logan, Box 30035, Lansing 48909; Radon Project, The University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 (412)624-3513 or the American Lung Association of Southeast Michigan, 18890 W. Ten Mile Road, Southfield 48076.

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