



consumer mailbag

Terry Gibb

Radon 'daughters' are health worry

Q. What is radon? Where does it come from? Is it dangerous?

A. Radon is a naturally occurring, radioactive gas found in minute concentrations nearly everywhere on earth. Radon is odorless, colorless, tasteless and chemically inert.

Radon is formed by the radioactive transformation (decay) of an isotope of radium-226. This decaying process begins in the earth's crust with uranium-238. Radium-226 and radon-222 are in the middle of this decaying process.

Uranium-238 decays to Radium-226, which becomes Radon-222, etc. The production of radon remains constant in the earth's surface.

AS AN INERT gas, radon permeates through soil and moves along cracks in the earth or through underground aquifers until it eventually reaches the surface.

Significant amounts can enter a home and accumulate, producing a possible health hazard. Radon enters the house through imperfections in the basement foundation, such as cracks in the basement walls or floor, service openings including sewer, water, sump pump, hollow-concrete block walls or wall-floor joints.

Radon remains trapped in the house, especially energy-efficient homes, because they are designed to keep the inside air from escaping.

Radon gas has been linked to some cases of lung cancer.

RADON'S "DAUGHTERS" — and not the radon gas itself — are the

primary health concern.

These "daughters" — polonium-218, lead-214, bismuth-214 and polonium-214 — are not gases but solids. They become suspended freely or attached to dust particles in the air.

When inhaled, these particles line the lung's air passages and can result in damage which may cause cancer.

Nationwide research indicates that the earth's geological formation plays a part in an area's radon levels. Some areas in Pennsylvania and New Jersey report that 65 percent of homes tested have high levels of radon.

CURRENTLY, THERE are two approaches to reducing indoor radon levels:

1) Prevent radon entry into the home by sealing all foundation cracks, floor-wall joints and service openings, sealing the tops of hollow-block concrete walls and providing heat exchange or increased external ventilation.

2) Remove radon and its daughters already in the home. Methods are currently being studied.

Nationally, much research is being conducted on radon and its health effects. In Michigan, a study is being considered to identify if there are land areas that might cause radon levels to be a health hazard for Michigan residents.

The Consumer Mailbag answers your questions. Address mail to The Consumer Mailbag, Concern Detroit, 1025 Shelby, Detroit 48226.

State environment laws ranked 5th

AP — Michigan's efforts to protect and preserve its air, water and soil rank among the best in the nation, according to an environmental advocacy group.

The Fund for Renewable Energy and the Environment last week ranked Michigan fifth among the state governments. At the top were Wisconsin, California, New Jersey and Connecticut.

The study analyzed legislation and programs each state has in place to encourage wise use of its natural resources, but didn't measure how good or bad the environmental conditions were in the states.

It focused on efforts related to air pollution reduction, soil conservation, groundwater protection, hazardous waste management, solid waste and recycling, and renewable energy and conservation, with Michigan scoring 43 out of a possible 60 points.

Top-ranked Wisconsin scored 49, and Mississippi scored last with 14.

"NOT SURPRISINGLY, some states with the worst problems have the best programs," the fund's report

said. "Also, states with high per capita income are generally able to direct more funds to environmental protection."

Michigan's hazardous waste management program scored nine out of a possible 10 points. The group noted the state has its own "Superfund" clean-up program, strict regulations on small generators of hazardous wastes, community "right to know" requirements and a program to collect household hazardous wastes, and offers financial and technical incentives to reduce hazardous wastes.

The state's programs related to air pollution reduction, groundwater protection, and solid waste management all were rated at eight out of 10 points.

While some parts of Michigan exceed recommended standards for carbon monoxide, ozone and particulates, the state does have control programs for toxic air pollutants and acid rain, has a government-approved plan for managing solid waste, offers a comprehensive solid waste recycling program, and has groundwater quality standards in place, the group said.



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