

Learn about risks, likelihood of radon

By BILL GARWOOD
For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 07/26/04

Our home inspection company offers radon testing as a service in addition to the basic home inspection. In most cases we find that homebuyers, sellers and real estate professionals know very little about radon and its risks. The following are answers to some of our most frequently asked questions about radon.

What is radon?

Radon is a radioactive gas resulting from the natural breakdown of uranium in soil, rock and water. Levels of radon are most commonly measured in picoCuries per liter of air (pCi/L). When indoor air levels are elevated, it becomes a health risk. The EPA recommends that action be taken if levels are 4 pCi/L or greater.

How can radon harm me?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Surgeon General have determined that radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. (Cigarette smoking is the No. 1 cause.) The risk of lung cancer is especially high if you smoke and live in a house with elevated levels of radon. Although the fact is disputed by some scientists, most major health organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Lung Association and the American Medical Association, agree that exposure to elevated levels of indoor radon is a health risk. In fact, information contained in a National Academy of Sciences report on radon estimates that exposure to indoor radon causes 15,000 to 22,000 deaths a year.

Where is radon found?

Radon has been found in homes in every state in the nation. Levels of radon can vary from house to house. The fact that your neighbor's house has low levels of radon does not mean that yours does. According to the EPA's map of radon zones, in the state of Georgia, the four counties with high potential for elevated indoor radon levels are Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett and Cobb. This does not mean, however, that a house located in another county does not have elevated levels of radon.

How do I test my house for radon?

Either the homeowner or a professional can perform testing. In the state of Georgia, there is no certification necessary for performing radon testing. Radon testing kits are available by mail from qualified testing laboratories. Some hardware and home improvement stores also sell radon-testing kits. Procedures for conducting the test will vary with the device used and should be included with the devices.

What do I do if my house has elevated levels of radon?

Radon levels can be lowered to a safe level. Check with the state Environmental Protection Division for a list of certified "radon mitigation" contractors. In many cases radon levels can be reduced for less than \$3,000.

Additional information

The publication "A Citizen's Guide to Radon" can be downloaded from the EPA Web site at www.epa.gov/radon/pubs/citiguide. Additional information can be obtained by calling the National Radon Information Line: 1-800-767-7236.

Send home repair questions to Ask the Inspector at H&G@ajc.com. Because of the volume of mail, not all questions can be answered. Our expert, Bill Garwood, spent 15 years as a building contractor before

becoming a home inspector in 1990. He is part owner of a residential inspection firm and a company providing training in building inspection and codes.