

Counselor's Corner

Lowering Radon Levels: Help for Consumers

by Andrea Bushnell, OAR General Counsel

The following information can be obtained in more complete, pamphlet form, free of charge from Laura Culberson, OSPIRG, 1536 SE 11 th Ave., Portland, OR 97214, phone 503/231-4181. Do your part to protect your buyers and sellers from exposure to a potentially deadly gas and lower your risk at the same time.

Radon is a cancer-causing gas produced by the breakdown of uranium in soil, rock, and water. It is odorless and colorless. It typically moves up through the ground and into homes through holes in the foundation. Your home traps radon inside, where it can build up. Any home may have a radon problem. This means new and old homes, well-sealed and drafty homes, and homes with or without basements.

Radon causes an estimated 14,000 lung cancer deaths each year. In fact, the U.S. Surgeon General has warned that radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. If you smoke and your home has a high level of radon, your risk of lung cancer is especially high.

TEST FIRST

Testing is the only way to know if you and your family are at risk from radon. Any exposure to radon has some risk of causing lung cancer. The lower the radon level in your home, the lower your family's risk of lung cancer.

The U.S. Surgeon General and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommend testing for radon and reducing radon in homes that have high levels. Fix your home if your radon level is confirmed to be 4 picocuries per liter (pCi/L) or higher.

HOW TO GET HELP

Consumer Federation of America (CFA), a nonprofit consumer organization, operates the Radon Fix-It Program which is free of charge. The Radon Fix-It Line provides guidance and encouragement to consumers with elevated radon levels of 4 pCi/L or higher to take the necessary steps toward fixing their homes. Fix-It Line operators provide:

- referrals to technical experts in your state government
- a list of radon contractors rated as proficient by EPA or your state who are qualified to offer advice and perform radon mitigation and information about
- reducing elevated radon levels
- choosing a test kit or a testing company
- testing in connection with a real estate transaction.

CFA's toll-free Radon Fix-It Line is for people whose radon test results are 4pCi/L or higher. People with elevated radon levels should call 1-800-644-6999.

BUYING A HOME

Would you like to be sure the home you plan to buy does not have dangerous levels of radon? Here's how to do it.

First, have the home tested. Because radon gas is odorless and colorless the only way to know whether there are dangerous levels is to test the home.

If time is of the essence, as in a real estate transaction, short term tests can be completed in a matter of days. Long term tests take three months or more. Simple, relatively inexpensive do-it-yourself radon test kits can be purchased from a hardware or home store or through the mail. You can also hire a professional testing company to conduct the test. Be sure that the test kit or testing company you choose is rated as proficient by EPA or your state.

Remember, elevated radon levels can be fixed and can almost always be reduced to below 4pCi/L. If testing confirms radon levels in the home to be at or above 4pCi/L, consider having the radon level reduced before you move in. Talk with your real estate professional or settlement attorney about how to put fixing the home into the purchase agreement.

SELLING YOUR HOME

Sellers should consider beginning a long term test as soon as the decision to sell is made. In many cases, the time interval between deciding to sell and writing a contract or going to settlement is greater than the 91 days or more required for a long term test.

First, have your home tested. The only way to know whether your home has dangerous levels is to test it.

Second, if radon levels are elevated, have your home fixed. If testing confirms radon levels in your home at or above 4pCi/L, EPA recommends that you take steps to lower the radon level.

HOME INSPECTORS

Home inspectors are often hired by buyers or sellers to examine a home before a real estate transaction is finalized. A professional inspection can alert a seller to existing or potential problems such as radon, allowing the seller to address them so as not to discourage a possible buyer. A buyer wants assurances before he or she buys that the property does not have structural or other problems that could lead to unanticipated expenses after purchase.

Basic home inspections cover all major mechanical and structural systems such as heating, electrical, plumbing or roofing. If the home already has a radon mitigation system, have it checked for proper operation. Many home inspectors are qualified to inspect for environmental problems, including measuring radon levels. If your home inspector is rated proficient by EPA or your state to measure radon, consider asking them to test the home.

Lowering Radon Levels: Help for Consumers, by Andrea Bushnell
Oregon REALTOR®, January 1997, pp. 4, 6.
Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.
Further reproduction or distribution without permission is prohibited.