

The Wisconsin REALTORS® Association
REAL ESTATE ADVISOR

RADON
UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING THE RISK

By Rick Staff

I recently received a call regarding a large billboard sponsored by a local hospital that featured a drawing of a person with bright red lungs above the caption “RADON KILLS!” The caller was concerned about the public reaction this image might generate. The lack of information in this message is very disturbing. It is about as appropriate and accurate as a billboard stating “PEOPLE DIE IN THIS HOSPITAL!” Both billboards messages are accurate, yet neither provides any useful information. This Real Estate Advisor article will offer objective data about the risks posed by radon, as well as suggestions for people buying and building homes who have concerns about radon exposure.

What is radon? Radon is a naturally-occurring, odorless, radioactive gas.

What are the health risks posed by radon? Scientists have agreed that Radon can cause lung cancer. Radon is present in outside air, in offices, stores and in your home. Because the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assumes you will spend more time at home than anyplace else, the vast majority of the health community’s outreach addresses radon in the home. According to the EPA, homeowners whose homes test at or above 4 pCi/L (pico curies per litre of air) are advised to take action to lower the radon levels in the home. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, between five and ten percent of the homes in Wisconsin have radon levels above the EPA guideline of 4 pCi/L. This doesn’t mean that a reading of 4 pCi/L suggests an immediate health threat exists. According to the EPA, the health risk posed by 4 pCi/L of radon is calculated assuming lifetime exposure. The EPA standards indicate that if a thousand non-smokers tested for radon in their basements and got readings of 4 pCi/L, and if they spent 70% of every day, over a 74 year period in their basement (that’s nearly 52 years in the basement!), 2 of those 1,000 non-smokers will get lung cancer from radon. The risk is substantially lower if you spend less time in the basement. The risk of lung cancer is significantly higher for smokers exposed to radon. Other studies confirm the EPA’s standards, with variations from one study to the next. Yes, radon kills but even the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services says “there is no chance that someone could get lung cancer from radon before age 35.”

How will you know if you have a radon problem? Any home may have elevated radon levels. However, one cannot assume that any home (even in the regions with the highest radon levels) will have elevated radon – each property is unique. Homeowners and homebuyers will be well served to test their property for elevated radon. . The keys for anyone testing for radon are the following:

- 1) If the testing is being done by a buyer in a real estate transaction get permission for the testing from the seller by including a radon contingency in your offer. Without this contingency you may not have the right to perform this testing.

- 2) Look for individuals certified to do testing in the *Radon Proficiency Program for Residential Measurement*. A list is available in Wisconsin by calling toll-free 888 569-7236 (888 LOW-RADON) and on the Internet at: www.neha.org/Radonpage.html .
- 3) Ensure that the EPA protocol is followed by the person doing the testing. Some buyer's have walked away from perfectly safe homes because a non-certified tester has placed a radon canister next to a sump pit and obtained a false report of elevated radon problems. The EPA says that you should test in the lowest level of the home that is finished and suitable for occupancy... that a buyer could use for living space without renovations. "Don't test in a bathroom, kitchen or laundry room. Canisters should be placed at least 20" above the floor, away from windows, doors, outside walls, heat sources, humidity and breezes. Details of this protocol can be found in the EPA's publication *Home Buyer's and Seller's Guide to Radon* at: <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/radon/pubs/hmbyguid.html>

The best news about radon is that, properly installed, radon control techniques are 100% effective. For radon reduction in existing homes you should always consider the use of contractors who are certified (and trained) in a Radon Proficiency Program. To get a copy of the Radon Mitigation Contractor Proficiency list for the state, call one of the Wisconsin Radon Information Centers toll free at 888 569-7236 (888 LOW-RADON).

(Note to local board – insert local office info by going to this link:
http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/dph_beh/RadonProt/radon/RadonInfoCenters.htm)

For new construction in Wisconsin (where gravel and a vapor barrier are standard) the extra cost to build radon-resistance into your new home typically runs about \$300, covering the costs of PVC pipe stack, sealing cracks and a sump. More information on radon-resistant construction can be obtained from the US EPA's radon Web site (www.epa.gov/iaq/radon).

Radon does present a potential health risk. It is important to collect accurate information and not overreact to potentially incorrect or incomplete information. The more radon information you can gather the better you will be able to manage the health risks.