

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#3 - Agency Urges Radon Testing On All NJ Homes North Of Trenton

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The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has set the first home safety standard for radioactive radon gas, recommending that homeowners take action to reduce the level of radon gas if it exceeds 4 picocuries per liter of air. One picocurie (a trillionth of a curie, a common measure of radiation) represents the decay of two radon atoms per minute in a liter of air.

Radon is a colorless, odorless gas produced by the decay of naturally-occurring uranium in soil; prolonged exposure to radon can cause lung cancer. The EPA estimated that as many as 8 million homes across the nation may exceed the standard and people in such homes should take steps to reduce the level and not smoke tobacco. A spokesman for the NY State Health Department said that a recent survey indicated that 15% of the homes in that state have radon levels exceeding 4 picocuries.

Five homes in Clinton, NJ have radon levels of 1,000 picocuries and 200 homes have levels above 4 picocuries. PA state officials say that more than 13,000 of 22,000 homes in 4 eastern PA counties surveyed had levels exceeding 4 picocuries.

Environmental officials said homeowners have to have their homes tested to find out if it contains the gas which can't be seen or smelled. Testing kits may be bought by homeowners for \$10 to \$50 apiece or private contractors can be hired. A spokesman for the radiation division of the EPA called radon "the biggest environmental radiation problem" in the US today. The agency said radon could account for 5,000 to 20,000 lung cancer deaths nationwide each year.

Several NJ municipalities are offering local homeowners inexpensive kits for testing homes for radon. Manville, Raritan and Somerville are offering test kits for \$15 each. A local health official places the collector in the home, returns 3 days later to pick it up for analyzing, and reports the results directly to the homeowner. Two other Somerset County towns, Branchburg and Bridgewater, are providing low-cost testing kits, but homeowners must place the collectors themselves. Public health experts have recommended that NJ homeowners north of Trenton test their homes for radon.

To reduce radon levels, homeowners may need to take steps as simple as installing fans for ventilation, (estimated to cost about \$150) or as involved as sealing cracks along walls and floors (\$300-\$500) and installing exhaust pipes to draw the radon back outdoors (costing from \$2,500 to \$5,000). NJ radon hotline: 800-648-0394.

-Peter Montague

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COMMON WEED KILLER NOW LINKED TO CANCER DEATHS IN NEW STUDY

A new study by the National Cancer Institute and the University of Kansas has linked exposure to herbicides with nonHodgkins lymphoma, lymphatic cancers besides Hodgkins disease. The study was based on the health histories of 948 male Kansas farmers who had cancer and an equal number of non-cancer victims for comparison.

The study points up 2,4-D as a cause of cancer; 2,4-D is found in many lawn-care products commonly used around suburban homes.

The study found that if farmers were exposed to herbicides 20 days a year or more, they were 600% more likely to contract lymphatic cancer than people who did not work with herbicides. The risk for farmers who came in actual contact, mixing or applying the chemicals, increased eightfold. Farmers who failed to use protective equipment such as gloves or masks while working with pesticides were 40% more likely to develop cancer than those who used protection.

The higher cancer risk was found to be particularly associated with 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, or 2,4-D, a chemical compound used in a variety of herbicides. Agent Orange, the herbicide sprayed in Vietnam that is the focus of lawsuits filed by exposed veterans, contains 2,4-D and an established link between cancer and exposure to 2,4-D could have a profound effect on those lawsuits.

--Peter Montague

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DUPONT NOW FAVORS CONTROLS ON CHEMICALS HARMING EARTH'S OZONE

E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Company, which makes 20% to 25% of the world's chlorofluorocarbons, now supports worldwide production limits. DuPont is NJ's largest chemical producer. Chlorofluorocarbons, used as refrigeration fluids and foamblowing agents, destroy the ozone layer that protects the earth from cancer-causing ultraviolet light. A DuPont Spokesman said the company's new position is based on recent findings that chlorofluorocarbons destroy the ozone and the discovery of a drastic 40% drop in ozone over the South Pole each winter.

--Peter Montague

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NJ WILL REQUIRE MOST GAS PUMPS TO INSTALL AIR POLLUTION TRAPS

NJ has ordered gasoline stations in the state to install equipment to trap noxious vapors released by their pumps in an effort to meet a Dec. 1987 deadline for federal air quality standards. Gasoline vapors are considered one of the main sources of air pollution. Most of the state will lose federal construction project funding if smog levels don't meet federal standards by the deadline. Those pumping less than 10,000 gallons a month (2,259 gas stations out of 6,785 in the state) are exempt.

--Peter Montague

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ASBESTOS HAZARD FOUND IN TOYS

Health officials recalled two brands of children's play sand because they may contain cancer-causing asbestos fibers. The brands recalled were Premium Play Sand, sold through Child World toy stores and Kiddies Fun Sand, sold through Toys-R-Us.

--Peter Montague

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