

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: Should I be Concerned about Radon?

Most people have heard of radon and understand it to be a radioactive substance. What is less clear to many is: 1) the extent that radon causes health-related problems and 2) the degree to which someone is exposed. Lately, reports have surfaced expressing concerns linking radon emissions and granite countertops. How can something that has been around as long as the earth suddenly become such as major environmental risk?

**What is radon and where does it come from?** Radon is formed by the natural radioactive decay of uranium in rock, soil, and water. It is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Unless you tested for it, you would have no idea of its presence or its amount. It is found in all 50 states, although it is more prevalent in certain parts of the country, particularly the central and mountain states of the U.S.

**How do we become exposed to radon?** The US Environmental Protection Agency has determined that most radon exposure occurs from the radon gas that moves up through the ground and into your home through cracks and other holes in the foundation. The amount of radon in the soil depends on soil chemistry, which varies widely from one location to the next. Houses trap radon gas inside where it can build up to dangerous levels. Radon gas decays into radioactive particles that enter the lungs when breathing. The energy released by these particles is capable of damaging the lungs and in some instances can lead to the development of lung cancer.



**What are the health risks associated with radon exposure?** Breathing radon has no apparent short-term effects on the lungs such as causing shortness or breath, wheezing or coughing. Nor is there conclusive evidence that exposure to high levels of radon will predictably cause lung disease. Nevertheless, the US Surgeon General considers radon to be the second leading cause of lung cancer. Only cigarette smoking is more closely tied to the development of lung cancer. The risk of developing lung cancer is particularly high in those cigarette smokers who have significant radon exposure. It has been estimated that 21,000 deaths per year in the US are tied to radon exposure.

**How is radon detected in the home?** The average radon concentration in the

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indoor air of America's homes is about 1.3 picocuries per liter (pCi/L). Although



there is no safe level of radon exposure, the EPA recommends addressing radon if you have a radon level of 4 pCi/L or more in the home. The amount of radon in the home can be determined with the use of in-home testing devices. The most commonly used consumer testing devices are short-term passive devices. With these, the homeowner collects a sample which is sent in for analysis. There are also long-term testing devices available that are often used to confirm a positive short-term test. Free test kits are sometimes available from local or county health departments or from your state American Lung Association.

**What should be done if the radon level is too high?** If radon levels are found to be unhealthy, measures to mitigate the problem may be necessary. Usually, this means calling in a professional radon contractor. In addition to sealing cracks and other openings in the floors and walls that allow radon gas to seep into the home, the contractor may recommend the use of underground pipes and exhaust fans to reduce the radon level in the home. Retesting should then be done to assure that the radon level in the home has been reduced to acceptable levels.

For information on testing for or mitigating radon in your home, contact your [State Radon Contact](#) or the [National Environmental Health Association](#). For more information on radon and its health effects, see EPA's [Citizen's Guide to Radon](#).

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