



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Vermont Contractor Builds Radon Protection Into Every Home

Whether your home is old or newly constructed, get it tested for radon

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WAITSFIELD – Ward Smyth made it his business 30 years ago to be aware of – and understand how to – protect homeowners from exposure to radon gas. Every home Smyth has built or renovated has underground pipes vented through the roof, and a tough vinyl sheet under the concrete foundation to prevent the odorless radioactive gas from seeping through the basement and into the living quarters.

Breathing in too much radon gas is the nation's second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. Exposure to radon is especially hazardous for smokers. Radon, found naturally in the earth's bedrock, typically enters a home through cracks, fissures and holes in the foundation or concrete slab.

A house can act like a large chimney, with warm air rising and escaping out upper floor windows and through cracks in the attic. This creates a vacuum at the lowest level of the house, which can pull the radon from the bedrock and soil into the house. The best way to prevent exposure to radon in new housing is to build in a vent pipe system and fan, which pulls radon from beneath the house and vents it to the outside. The only way to know if your home has radon is to test for it.

Smyth, 59, who founded Turtle Creek Builders in Waitsfield, Vt. in 2000, estimates the approximate \$350 cost of building in a radon system is one aspect of the homebuilding process that is non-negotiable with home buyers.

Smyth said he knew a friend from college who built a home in Connecticut that had radon and no way to fix the problem. His friend had to re-do the home's foundation and tear up the slab, which was expensive back in the 1980s before there were lower cost mitigation techniques.

"If anyone asked me if they could save the \$350 and opt out of the underground pipes, I would tell them – 'We could also save money by putting a tarp over the house instead of a roof – but we don't do things that way.'"

Only an estimated 10 percent of Vermont homes have been tested for radon, and of these, one in eight homes has radon above the action level of 4 pCi/L. Although it's easy to build a new home radon resistant, if a person's home was not built using radon resistant techniques and the odorless gas is detected, it's still easy to fix.

Test Your Home for Radon:

January is National Radon Action Month, and winter is the best time to test for radon.

Vermonters can order free long-term radon test kits from the Vermont Department of Health. Health officials recommend a long-term (three to 12 months) radon test as the most accurate way to measure radon levels in your home. If test results show that you have high levels of radon in your air, a mitigation system can be installed at a cost of approximately \$800-\$2,000.

Get a free long-term radon test kit from the Vermont Department of Health by e-mail: radon@ahs.state.vt.us, or call 1-800-439-8550 (option 3).

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