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Her lung cancer tied to radon

46% of tested homes show high gas level

Author: Jim Ritter; The Chicago Sun-Times

She's never smoked, so Barbara Sorgatz was stunned to learn she had lung cancer.

What probably caused the tumor, she later found out, was radioactive radon gas seeping into her home near Glen Ellyn.

Sorgatz didn't know about radon when she bought the house 23 years ago. After her diagnosis, she got the house tested and found that radon levels were about five times higher than the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standard.

This month, Illinois became the first state to require that home buyers receive educational pamphlets about radon.

The Illinois Radon Awareness Act also reconfirms buyers' rights to have houses tested for radon. A test by a licensed technician costs about \$125; the buyer pays.

KILLS UP TO 22,000 PEOPLE A YEAR

In 2003-04, about 46 percent of such tests in Illinois, including 30 percent of homes tested in Cook County, showed high radon levels.

Radon is a colorless, odorless, radioactive gas that seeps into the home. It comes from the radioactive decay of naturally occurring uranium in the soil.

Depending on the soil and other factors, homes on the same block can have significantly different levels. In the Chicago area, homes generally are at a moderate risk for radon.

Radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking. Smokers exposed to radon are at especially high risk. In the United States, radon causes 15,000 to 22,000 lung cancer deaths each year.

The Illinois Emergency Management Agency recommends all home buyers get a radon test before buying.

But even if you already own your home, it's a good idea to test it, according to the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago. And winter is the best time to test, because windows are closed and air conditioners turned off.

Radon test kits, sold at hardware stores and home centers, cost \$10 to \$20. For a coupon for a free kit, contact Eileen Lowery at the respiratory health association, (312) 628-0217, or elowery@lungchicago.org.

COSTS \$800-\$1,500 TO FIX

The EPA recommends fixing your home if radon levels are above 4 picoCuries per liter of air. A curie is a unit of radioactivity.

A radon fix generally costs \$800 to \$1,500. It includes sealing cracks, increasing ventilation and pumping radon out of the house.

Sorgatz, 54, spent \$1,200 fixing her home after learning of her cancer in 2006. Fortunately, a small tumor was spotted early in a CT scan ordered for a gallbladder problem. Last February, a surgeon removed more than a quarter of her left lung.

"I have a very good prognosis," she said.