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January is Radon Action Month; Check Your House for Radon

The early arrival of snow and ice this year has driven most of us indoors for the season, where our freshly caulked windows and new storm doors are sure to keep us warm. But by winterizing our houses, we decrease ventilation and indoor air quality becomes a concern, particularly with regard to radon. According to the American Lung Association, nearly one in 15 homes in the U.S. has a high level of indoor radon. When that fact is combined with the Environmental Protection Agency's estimate that most people spend 90% of their time indoors at this time of the year, the health risk from radon exposure is significantly increased.

Radon cannot be seen, smelled, or tasted. It is a colorless, odorless radioactive gas found in the soil that results from the natural breakdown of uranium in soil, rock, and water. It then rises to the air and is present in varying amounts. While radon is harmless outdoors, the concentration of this gas can build to unhealthy levels in buildings, especially in cold weather when structures are sealed up and winterized. Long-term exposure to high levels of radon can lead to lung cancer. The Surgeon General has warned that radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in this country today. Only smoking causes more lung cancer deaths, so if you smoke and your home has high levels of radon, your risk of lung cancer is especially high. The Environmental Protection Agency and the National Cancer Institute have placed the number of lung cancer deaths attributable to radon at about 15,000-22,000 each year in the United States.

According to the State Department of Public Health, studies have shown that radon levels posing a health risk can be found anywhere in the Northeast, including Connecticut, despite the type of construction materials used or the location of the home. Radon can be a problem in all types of homes, including old homes, new homes, drafty homes, insulated homes, homes with basements and homes without basements. The only way to know if a home has excessive radon is to test. And testing is inexpensive and easy to do.

Radon is measured in units called picocuries per liter. The E.P.A, while acknowledging that any exposure to radon is potentially dangerous, recommends that action be taken to reduce the level of radon whenever a test results in a finding of 4 picocuries per liter or more. Such action may be simple and inexpensive, such as sealing cracks and holes in the foundation, increasing ventilation by opening windows, vents, or doors, and covering exposed earth in the basement sump or crawl space. More expensive and complicated remedies may be necessary if the other methods do not sufficiently reduce the level of radon. These include providing alternative air supplies for furnaces, fire places, and clothes dryers, and sub-slab ventilation (contact a building contractor).

Radon in air can easily be measured. Residents who live in single family homes or basement, first, or second floor apartments are encouraged to purchase a radon detection kit and follow the simple instructions. The Central Connecticut Health District sells radon test kits at cost, for \$8.00. The kit includes the test, instructions, laboratory analysis, and postage, and results are sent directly to the person submitting the test for analysis. The Health District also has literature about radon available at no cost. Residents also can purchase radon test kits at some local hardware stores and from the National Radon Hotline at 1-800-SOS-RADON (1-800-767-7236). The National Safety Council offers a radon informational hotline at 1-800-2366. Additional information about radon is available by contacting the Environmental Protection Agency at www.epa.gov/radon, the National Safety Council at www.nsc.org, and the American Lung Association at www.lungusa.org. For a list of

companies that provide commercial testing and mitigation services, visit the Connecticut Department of Public Health's web site at www.dph.state.ct.us.

Questions about radon or other public health concerns also may be directed to the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).