

Radon: The Invisible Danger

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When there is visible danger, people do what it takes to protect themselves and their loved ones. But there is a danger you cannot see, feel hear or smell and it could be in your home, slowly and silently claiming lives.

We arm our homes with smoke detectors, burglar alarms and carbon monoxide detectors. But are you checking your home for another silent killer?

Nikki Walker beams with joy talking about the love of her life, Kip Walker. Nikki recalls, "Well, he was a very good looking man. He was always on the go. Every day, every night. I had a hard time keeping up with Kip. He lived life to the fullest."

Nikki says Kip "was always healthy and he just started getting a backache and that was the first sign of any problem." Their life of romantic dinners

and exotic trips was about to change. She says, "It was very shocking."

They just couldn't understand how a healthy 47 year old athletic, non-smoker could suddenly develop lung cancer. "My friends and I were talking, and they thought there might be something wrong with my environment, home environment," Nikki said.

Determined to find out, Nikki had their home tested for radon. Sure enough, her friends were right.

The Environmental Protection Agency says a radon level 4 pCi/L and higher is dangerous to your health. Kip's basement office had a radon level of 16 pCi/L.

Nikki says, "I had heard of it, but I didn't really think it was a problem for newer homes."

Mike Booth of the Johnson County Environmental Department is a radon expert. "Any house can have it. Any building can have it, if it has contact with the ground. Radon is a radioactive gas, it's naturally occurring, trace amounts of radon in the soil," Booth said.

You can't see it, smell it or taste it. There's no way to know you're breathing radioactive gas in your home unless you have your home tested.

Booth says radon is "the second leading cause of lung cancer behind smoking."

Doctors can only call it radon-related lung cancer. Medically, they cannot prove radon exposure is a singular cause of lung cancer. Nikki has her own conclusion. "There's really no other reason that he would have gotten it, so it's my belief that it was from that," she said.

The National Academy of Sciences reports an estimated 22,000 people will die this year of radon-related lung cancer.

The EPA tracks and maps areas at highest risk of having radon levels above 4 pCi/L, calling them "hot zones". Anything higher than a 4 is a health hazard. We found areas of high risk in Missouri and Kansas.

The reason radon is such a problem in our area is limestone. Limestone contains uranium and over time, the uranium in the ground decays into radon gas which can seep into the basement of your home.

Kansas Senator Jim Barnett says, "There are a lot of children who spend hours and hours asleep or playing in basements." Barnett is also a practicing physician and he wrote a bill which would require mandatory radon testing. That bill failed.

A compromise measure passed the Senate, requiring a radon warning in every sales contract for homes. Barnett says, "This is not the end, but it's a good start if we can pass this and raise awareness." Awareness erases the fear.

If you test and discover high radon levels, certified companies can come in and install mitigation systems, forcing radon under ground and away from your foundation so your home is safe again.

Four months after Kip Walker was diagnosed with lung cancer, he died. Nikki is helping save lives in honor of Kip's memory. Nikki says, "He'll always be in my heart and soul forever."

Thanks to Nikki's story, ten families tested their homes and caught the silent killer early. They had to install mitigation systems to get rid of excessive radon. You could have a high radon level in your home, but neighbors right next door could be perfectly safe. The bottom line? You have to test your home to know for certain.

NBC Action News is giving away 500 free Radon Test Kits, absolutely free. All you have to do is come to the station at 4720 Oak Street in Kansas City, Mo. And pick up one of the kits. The kits are available first come, first served beginning at 9 a.m. Tuesday until all 500 kits are gone.

We want to thank the National Safety Council, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment for providing the free test kits.

The free kits include postage and lab fees.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

Kansas Radon Hotline: 1-800-693-5343
Missouri Radon Hotline: 1-800-SOS-RADON
Missouri Bureau of Environmental Epidemiology
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
930 Wildwood, P.O. Box 570
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0570
Telephone: (573) 751-6160 or (866) 628-9891

Home Radon Detection Co. Inc.
Mike Hughes, EPA-NEHA-NRSB Certified Radon Testing and Mitigation
Overland Park, KS
913-782-1782

National Radon Information Line:
1(800)- SOS- Radon or 1-800-767-7236

Special Thanks To: The National Safety Council, The Missouri Department of Health and Human Services, and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment for providing the free Radon Test Kits for the NBC Action News Radon Awareness Project.

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