



Radon test kits can answer concerns about granite counter tops

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Recent news accounts have raised concerns about the possibility of radiation coming from granite counter tops. At issue is whether some granite counter tops emit dangerous levels of radiation, especially radon gas, which is the second leading cause of lung cancer after smoking.

“People concerned that granite counter tops may be contributing to radon in their home should test for it,” advised Jim McNees, assistant director of the Office of Radiation Control, Alabama Department of Public Health. “The test results will inform the homeowner or tenant whether there is a problem.”

Granite, as with other kinds of rocks and soils, contains some naturally occurring radioactive elements. It is made up of elements such as thorium, uranium and potassium which contribute to what scientists call “background” radiation. Background radiation is a combination of terrestrial and cosmic radiation that individuals are continuously exposed to as part of living on earth.

The amount of radioactivity in most granite is quite small. While it is possible to get a measurable level of direct radiation from some granite, in general granite emits less radiation than one is regularly exposed to from background radiation. These levels are so low that they are not harmful to human health. However, a very limited number of the more exotic granite colors have reportedly been found with more radioactivity than desirable. The granite countertop industry is reportedly taking action to remove these from the market.

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that can be released during the decay of radioactive elements in granite countertops but more commonly it can seep into homes from underground uranium deposits, and build up to higher than normal levels inside the home.

Most areas of Alabama are considered to be at a low or moderate risk level for excessive indoor radon levels; however Alabama has 15 counties that are considered high risk. COUNTIES AT HIGH RISK are Calhoun, Clay, Cleburne, Colbert, Coosa, Franklin, Jackson, Jefferson, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Morgan, Shelby and Talladega.

COUNTIES AT MODERATE RISK are Autauga, Barbour, Bibb, Blount, Bullock, Cherokee, Chilton, Choctaw, Cullman, Dallas, DeKalb, Elmore, Etowah, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Lee, Lowndes, Macon, Marion, Marshall, Montgomery, Perry, Pickens, Randolph, Russell, St. Clair, Sumter, Tuscaloosa, Walker and Winston.

COUNTIES WITH THE LOWEST POTENTIAL FOR RISK are Baldwin, Butler, Chambers, Clarke, Coffee, Conecuh, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Escambia, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Marengo, Mobile, Monroe, Pike, Tallapoosa, Washington and Wilcox.

No matter where you live it is still a good idea to test, and be certain elevated radon gas is not in the livable areas of your home. The Alabama Department of Public Health, along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Surgeon General, encourages everyone to test their home for radon. The test kits are simple and inexpensive.

As a public service the Alabama Cooperative Extension System sells radon test kits at wholesale prices in the Extension offices in Alabama's high radon counties for citizens to use to test their homes. The test kits are also available commercially.

For general information on radon call Jim McNees at 1-800-582-1866 or visit www.adph.org/radiation/ and search for granite counter tops.