

By Josh Sumner

The Wauneta Breeze

Most people know about the

health risks associated with prolonged exposure to radon—particularly its danger for causing lung cancer.

Instead of sitting idly by, the Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department is doing something about it.

Two SWNPHD workers recently equipped themselves in the fight against radon by receiving two separate certifications.

Director of Public Health Myra Stoney and Environmental Health Coordinator Shane Smith, both of the SWNPHD, are now officially licensed by the state of Nebraska in radon measurement and mitigation.

Their message to citizens in their health district: Test your home's radon levels today.

The SWNPHD's service area includes the counties of Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins and Red Willow.

Residents who live in these counties and would like radon testing can choose between picking up a free radon testing kit from the health department or paying \$125 to have a health official

come to their home to test.

Smith explained the differences between testing with a free kit and receiving an in-home visit from a health department staffer.

The free kits use activated charcoal to detect levels of lead, bismuth and other heavy metals caused by radon gas. They sit in your home for 72 hours before homeowners send them to a lab on the east coast for reading.

The testing performed by the SWNPHD takes 48 hours and are made available as soon as the testing is finished.

“The charcoal kits are still very effective—they give you a great idea of what the radon level is in your home,” said Smith. “The problem is that they sit in your house for 72 hours, then shipping time can take two to three days.”

If residents opt for an in-home visit, SWNPHD staffers will install a continuous radon monitor that is more accurate than the charcoal testing. Results are sent to a computer which can be read by the health department employee as soon as the 48 hours are up.

“With the continuous monitor, we know immediately what the radon level is in the home,” said Smith.

Another advantage of getting a 48-hour reading instead of a 72-hour reading is that the half-life in the radioactivity of the radon gas doesn't have as much time to break down, said Smith.

Still, Smith says either option is better than doing nothing at all. At last check there were about 90 free test kits available for residents in the health district.

As the SWNPHD gets better at accurately testing for radon, their next challenge is improving their ability to mitigate the cancer-causing gas.

Smith said he and Stoney are not able to mitigate radon themselves, however they can assist contractors who specialize in that area. A list of contractors in the region who are licensed for radon mitigation is available from the SWNPHD.

Smith said right now is a good time for people to perform radon tests because levels are usually higher in summer and winter months.

“Everybody has their house shut up in the summer and winter,” said Smith. “In the spring and fall, we get good air movement, and radon levels tend to drop.”

Radon levels are measured in picocuries per liter. The Environmental Protection Agency recommends action if a reading over 4 picocuries per liter is detected—sometimes in the form of a second test. Smith said that if the number is over 10 picocuries per liter, a second test isn’t necessary and the homeowner should go straight to mitigation.

Radon gas is caused by natural uranium breakdown in soil and is colorless, odorless and tasteless. The only way people know if they’re being exposed to it is through testing.

Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer, with smoking being first.