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Colorado woman works to raise awareness of the need for testing

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Corinne Stewart remembers the day in 2003 when her world changed. Her husband came home not feeling well, with a temperature of 104. "I said, 'We got to check this out,'" she said. He had a chest X-ray and then, after more testing, the diagnosis: stage four lung cancer. He died in 2005.

The cancer was puzzling. Her husband had never smoked. He owned Consolidated Hardwoods in Broomfield, Colo., but Stewart was able to find no research linking sawdust and lung cancer. Then she hit on another idea: radon.

The day before her husband's funeral, she got back test results from their Broomfield home of 15 years. It had radon levels higher than deemed acceptable by the Environmental Protection Agency.

She will never know if radon exposure caused her husband's cancer. There's no way to prove a link. But she wants to make sure that people know that radon can cause lung cancer, and that they should get their homes checked.

According to EPA estimates, radon is the No. 1 cause of lung cancer among nonsmokers. Radon is believed to be responsible for about 21,000 lung cancer deaths every year, with 2,900 of those deaths among people who have never smoked.

Radon is a colorless, odorless gas emitted from uranium, which occurs naturally in soils. In the outdoors, radon rising out of the dirt dissipates in the air. But, because air pressure inside a house is generally lower than the pressure in the soil outside, a home draws in radon through cracks and pipes that fit loosely.

Radon is measured in pico curies. The EPA recommends mitigation if levels reach above 4. Stewart's house tested at 9.6, considered in the slightly high range. She got several estimates and hired a local company to drill a 5-inch hole in her basement, place a pipe through the hole and install a fan to vent the air to the outside. Follow-up testing showed that the first pipe didn't bring the radon down to acceptable levels, so a second pipe was installed, bringing the level down to 3.8 pico curies. The cost: \$900.

"I feel better about this now," Stewart said. "I used to think I better not go in the basement."

Mark Linton, mitigation manager for RDS Environmental in Lafayette, Colo., who did the work on Stewart's home, said mitigation works by creating an air pocket under the home where radon gas can collect.

"We try to remove some of the dirt ... and create an air pocket," he said.



Corinne Stewart, foreground, holds a photograph of herself and her late husband, Ralph, who died of lung cancer. Her daughters stand behind.

At Stewart's house, the clay underneath the spot drilled was so hard, it was difficult for the radon to collect, necessitating another drilling.

Linton said costs for mitigation typically run from \$800 to \$1,400, although every home is different.

Susan Martino of Boulder County Public Health said people hiring a mitigation company should check that the person doing the mitigation has received certification in radon mitigation from the EPA and other certifying agencies and that they have kept up on their training. She suggests writing into the contract that the work should be done according to EPA protocols.

She also said a test is just a snapshot of a short period of time. Even if a home has tested at below 4, a follow-up long-term test, which measures radon levels over a couple of months, is a good idea, she said.

Stewart said she feels relieved to have the mitigation done at her house. She and her daughters, Carly, 15, and Lacey, 12, have had chest X-rays, which came back normal. Now comes the long process of living their lives without a husband and father.

"He worked a lot," Stewart said. "But every night he was here. (Sometimes) we'd go to the shop just to see him, make sure he was all right."

The girls grew up playing in the lumber yard, even learning to drive a Bobcat.

On a recent weekday, Carly and Lacey played in their front yard with a month-old starling. They rescued the baby bird after it fell from its nest. The bird, which hasn't yet learned to fly, perched on Carly's finger, as she fed him a bug she unearthed from the flower bed.

"(We) have to take him everywhere," Stewart said of the bird. "He goes to the store, and everywhere."

What do the girls miss most about their dad?

"Just being around him," Lacey said quietly.