

Test time: Regular radon, paint and water checks keep rural homes safe

By Tabitha Kuehn, Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health April 12, 2024



Testing and checking your home for hazards such as lead paint, radon and well water contaminants are important steps in ensuring your living space is safe for you and your loved ones.

Photo courtesy I-CASH

Since my career has shifted to the fields of safety and public health, my family and friends have received numerous texts from me reminding them to wear sunscreen, to be cognizant of protecting their hearing when doing the likes of hammering and attending concerts, and beyond.

Recently, I attended the Public Health Conference of Iowa and was reminded of the importance of assessing your home for lead and radon and testing well water for contaminants.

My family members all received texts from me reminding them to inspect the condition of the paint in their older homes.

Safety and health reminders are always good to have, but I realize many of you probably don't have a pestering public health relative like my family does, so I thought this would be a good time to go over some lead, radon and well water tests and checks people should be staying on top of.

Exposure to any of these contaminants can have serious health implications, so it is important to be educated on the preventive measures you should be taking to keep you and your loved ones safe.

First, let's focus on lead. Lead exposure can be dangerous for adults and children and can lead to poisoning. Lead can enter the body by ingesting lead-contaminated water, soil and paint chips or by inhaling lead particles in the air. Food can also be contaminated with lead via soil or water.

Lead poisoning is especially dangerous for children, as it may cause developmental delays and learning difficulties. Other symptoms of lead poisoning in children include seizures, hearing loss, abdominal pain and more.

Lead poisoning in adults can cause joint pain, high blood pressure, mood disorders and reproductive challenges such as reduced sperm count, miscarriages and still births.

Lead paint is the most common cause of childhood lead poisoning in Iowa. Prior to 1978, lead paint was widely used on the interior and exterior of homes.

All homeowners and occupants of homes built before 1980 should assume their home may contain lead paint, even if the home has been remodeled or repainted.

The condition of the paint in the home should be checked regularly. Areas with chipping or peeling should be addressed immediately.

Lead paint chips and dust should be carefully removed with a damp paper towel and discarded in the trash, and then the surface where the chips or dust were needs to be cleaned.

Floors should be regularly mopped to control dust, and areas like windowsills should be wiped down weekly.

Renovations should be done using lead-safe practices and only certified Iowa lead-safe contractors should be used.

Radon is another dangerous element you need to be aware of when it comes to your home.

Radon is an invisible, tasteless, odorless gas that occurs naturally underground but can get into homes through cracks in the floors and walls. Radon can cause lung cancer, and it is the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers.

The entire state of Iowa is at high risk for elevated levels of radon gas.

Homes should be tested for radon every two years and after renovations. All homes need to be tested for radon, regardless of age or location. Radon test kits can be sourced through the Iowa Radon Hotline, by contacting your county public health department or ordered online.

If high levels of radon are detected, a radon mitigation system will need to be installed in the home. The Iowa Radon hotline can connect property owners to certified radon mitigation professionals. Contact the Iowa Radon Hotline at 1-800-383-5992.

Well water should also be routinely tested for contaminants. Groundwater can be contaminated through various natural and human processes, and these contaminants can pose risks to human health.

Private wells should be tested annually for bacteria and nitrate. Test for nitrite if nitrate levels are high. Test for arsenic at least once and more frequently if you live in an area where other wells have exhibited changing levels.

If you notice changes or abnormalities, such as sediment or discoloration, schedule a well water test and find an alternative source of water until the water has been proved safe for consumption.

Wells also need to be tested if flood waters inundate the well, or if the well has sat idle for multiple weeks.

Contact your county health department to see if they participate in the Grants for Counties program and can help pay for your well test.

For additional information on how to correctly obtain a sample and submit it for testing, refer to the State Hygienic Laboratory web page at shl.uiowa.edu.

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