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Widow thought home, because it was not old, was safe from radon

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HEALTH WITH [MONIFA THOMAS](#) mjthomas@suntimes.com.

After seeing a story on the news, Joe Linnertz talked to his wife, Gloria, about getting their home of 18 years tested for radon. But their house wasn't very old, so they decided it wasn't necessary.

A year later, Joe Linnertz, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer that his wife later found out was likely caused by exposure to high levels of radon.

Testing of the couple's home in Downstate Waterloo after Joe Linnertz's death in 2006 showed radon levels four times higher than the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standard.

"I wanted to tear the house down," Gloria Linnertz said. "I thought, 'The house is what caused this.' "

Radon -- an odorless, colorless radioactive gas that seeps into homes from soil -- is the second-leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking. And 46 percent of Illinois homes have radon levels higher than the EPA standard, according to the Illinois Emergency Management Agency.

"The only way to know you have a problem is to test," said the state agency's Pat Daniels.

Yet, many homeowners and home buyers don't follow that advice, according to Chicago-area real estate agents and state data.

"Very rarely do I have anybody in my area calling for a radon test," said Patrick Zomparelli, an Orland Park real estate agent for more than 20 years.

"Nobody really asks about it," said Mabel Guzman, president-elect of the Chicago Association of Realtors and a Realtor in the South Loop.

Illinois was the first state to require that home buyers receive educational pamphlets about radon. After the Illinois Radon Awareness Act took effect in 2008, radon testing was conducted during 25 percent of real estate transactions statewide, including home sales, compared with 8 percent in 2007, Daniels said, citing data from radon measurement and mitigation companies licensed by the state emergency management agency.

Still, only about 100,000 homes statewide have been tested since 2003 -- a fraction of the millions of housing units in Illinois, Daniels said.

Any home, whether it's new or old, can have a radon problem. And levels can vary from house to house even on the same block.

Radon levels in the six-county metropolitan area are generally lower than in the rest of the state.

Smokers are particularly vulnerable to radon exposure.

Professional testing costs about \$125 to \$150. Test kits can also be purchased at hardware stores and home centers.

The EPA recommends fixing your home if radon levels are above 4 picocuries per liter of air.

Fixing a radon problem -- called radon mitigation -- typically costs from \$800 to \$1,200. Mitigation systems collect radon before it enters the home, and they dilute radon concentrations inside the home through increased ventilation.

To find a list of licensed labs that sell test kits, contact the Illinois Emergency Management Agency at (800) 325-1245 or go online to *radon.illinois.gov*.

"It's a simple test," Gloria Linnertz said. "You could be saving the life of someone you love."