Radon is invisible, odorless and tasteless, but it is far from harmless. It is the second-leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. January is Radon Action Month. Now is a perfect time to test for radon and plan mitigation procedures if they are needed. Radon testing is easiest and most effective in the winter months when houses are closed up for winter heating.

Radon is naturally occurring and is most often present in the rocky crags and ridges around Fairbanks. The radioactive gas formed as uranium breaks down in the rock or soil. Because it is a gas, it moves through spaces in the rock or soil and works its way into small cracks and holes in the foundation to get into your home. Even the smallest crack or opening can let radon enter.

Once it is in a home, people can breathe it into their lungs, where it can cause cell damage that may lead to lung cancer. This makes it particularly deadly when combined with cigarette smoke. A high level of radon and a smoker in the house combine to increase the chances of residents contracting lung cancer. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that radon may cause 20,000 lung cancer deaths per year.

As many as one in 15 homes may have elevated radon levels. Though it is present in much of our housing stock, fixing the problem can come in at a reasonable cost. The cost of radon mitigation usually runs between $800 and $2,500 on an existing home, and protecting a new home from the start can be done for as little as $250 to $750.

Testing is the only way to determine whether you have a problem. Every home is different because of the soil it sits on, construction details and maintenance. Results of a neighbor’s radon test cannot tell you if you have a radon problem. In addition, if you remodel your home, weatherize it, change heating systems, add an exhaust fan, or experience an earthquake or flood, the radon level in your home may change and require another test.
Performing a radon test on your own is easy and inexpensive. Short-term tests are used for two to three days. These tests can give you an idea of the level of radon in your home, but the longer the test, the more accurate the results. Since radon levels tend to be variable, a longer testing period of three weeks to three months is recommended. For around $30 you can buy a short- or a long-term test to determine a single average radon level. If you want to hire a professional, for a few hundred dollars you can get a dynamic reading over three days.

Since this news column is about saving money, I want to share with you how you can test your home at no cost. The Cooperative Extension Service has received a grant that will purchase testing kits that will be given out to a sampling of folks who attend our educational events in January. You can attend one of our programs and your name goes in a hat for a free testing kit.

We will present radon programs in Fairbanks at 5:30 p.m. Jan. 15 at the Schaible Auditorium on the UAF campus and at noon Jan. 29 in the Noel Wien Library. If you live in North Pole, we will be talking about radon at noon Jan. 8 at the North Pole City Hall and at 11 a.m. Jan. 2 at the 17 Mile Homemakers meeting at the Senior Center. If you have a civic or church group that you would like one of us to speak at, give us a yell at 474-5854 and we’ll be glad to come.

You can reduce radon in your home by up to 99 percent by simply sealing cracks and other openings. For more information, see our new publication on Radon (RAD-00760), which is available online or at the Extension office at 724 27th Ave. in Fairbanks.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.