

Radon Action Month

Mark Banister

Did you know that January is National Radon Action Month? Neither did I, but apparently it is!

Did you know that radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the US and the leading cause among non-smokers, with more than 20,000 deaths a year?

Radon is an invisible, odorless, radioactive gas that occurs naturally in the earth's crust. Because it is a gas, it can migrate into buildings where people can breathe it in. High levels of radon usually come from the soil surrounding the home and can enter the house through cracks and openings on the lower levels, though problems may exist in other areas as well.. The US Surgeon General recommends that all homes be tested for radon. Fortunately, testing is easy. A recent internet search for radon testing kits yielded 20,000 results in 0.2 seconds (though I have to take their word for that!) Test kits are fairly inexpensive (generally in the \$25 range) and may be obtained through the internet or at home-improvement stores. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection lists competent testing firms at http://www.dep.state.pa.us/brp/radon_division/Rn_Services_Directory/Directory_Mainpage.htm, so be sure that your tester is approved.

A good start is to test both your basement and your first floor. If results indicate elevated levels, confirm this with follow up testing before you start panicking and/or spending a lot of money on repairs. Test results over 4.0 picoCuries/liter (pCi/L) typically warrant a fix, which may be as simple as sealing up foundation cracks. Radon mitigation companies are also available when more involved fixes are needed. As with any home repair, be sure to thoroughly investigate any firm performing radon mitigation—these firms are also licensed by the state. Refer to the link above for this information as well.

Well, there you are and a happy Radon Action Month to you all!

Winter Weather Dangers

Jim Gindlesperger



Winter weather inevitably brings along its own set of dangers and challenges. Knowing how to cope with them can make the weather more bearable.

Power failures, icy roads and sidewalks, home fires caused by inadequate or poorly maintained heating systems – all present challenges that we don't normally face in other times of the year.

Obviously, staying indoors as much as possible can help reduce the risk of car crashes and falls on the ice. However, this is not usually practical, and there are still those indoor hazards that we all face.

If space heaters and fireplaces are used to provide supplemental heat, the risk of household fires increases as well as the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. On the other hand, exposure to cold temperatures, whether indoors or outside, can cause other serious or life-threatening health problems.

Extreme cold is a dangerous situation that can bring on health emergencies in susceptible people, such as those without shelter or who are stranded, or who live in a home that is poorly insulated or without heat.

Taking preventive action is your best defense against cold-weather conditions. Prepare your home and car in advance for winter emergencies. Have your home heating system and fireplace cleaned and checked by a qualified inspector. Stock up on emergency supplies you may need in the event of an extended power outage. Make sure your car's tires are in good condition, and keep them properly inflated, and don't forget to keep a blanket in your vehicle just in case you do happen to become stranded.

By observing some basic safety precautions during times of extremely cold weather, you can reduce the risk of weather-related health problems.

Hazardous Material Shipments

Jeffrey Harris



The Office of Environmental Health & Safety is available to assist faculty, staff, and students who make hazardous material shipments. Although there are "Exemptions" and "Exceptions" any material that meets any one or combination of these classifications is a hazardous material:

- 1.0 – Explosive
- 2.0 – Flammable, non-Flammable or Toxic gas
- 3.0 – Flammable or combustible liquid
- 4.0 – Flammable or reactive solid
- 5.0 – Oxidizer or Organic Peroxide
- 6.0 – Toxic and Infectious Substance (includes many biological materials)
- 7.0 – Radioactive (includes isotopes, sealed sources and radiation producing equipment)
- 8.0 – Corrosive
- 9.0 – Misc. Hazardous Material (such as dry-ice)
- ORM-D Other regulated material (such as consumer commodities)

Besides having the appropriate paperwork, shipments must conform with strict packaging and labeling requirements. This includes domestic & international shipments, and applies to shipments by ground, air or water. It is *critical* that your shipments are in compliance by checking with EH&S. Beyond Dangerous Goods Declarations, other special paperwork for customs on imports and exports may apply. You are ultimately responsible for what you send out, so be sure you're sending it properly. For further information, visit our website at www.cmu.edu/ehs (under Chemical Safety / Ship Dangerous Goods).

Smoking Policy Update

Madelyn Miller & Anita Barkin



As a follow-up to our Nov. 10 email announcing Carnegie Mellon's new smoking policy, we are writing to update you on the progress being made toward implementation.

Carnegie Mellon

Lifeline Your Safety Resource

A publication of the Environmental Health & Safety Department

On Jan. 1, the new policy will begin to be phased-in while a diverse university-wide committee continues to work thoughtfully and diligently to select potential designated smoking areas. The 18-member committee, established by the Environmental Health & Safety Department, is comprised of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty and staff, and has representatives from the Greek community, Student Senate, the Graduate Student Assembly, Staff Council, Faculty Senate, University Police, and Campus Design and Facility Development.

While working to identify the designated smoking zones, the committee has decided to include the university community in the process. Once the committee completes a proposed list of designated smoking areas, a campus-wide survey created by Institutional Research & Analysis will be conducted to gather your feedback and input on which areas would work best.

Look for this survey early in the new year.

In the meantime, beginning Jan. 1, we are asking smokers to refrain from smoking in several smoke-free zones. These zones include the Cut, the Hamerschlag Mall, the Children's School and tennis courts, the Cyert Center and its adjacent playground, and areas around athletic facilities, including Gesling Stadium and the intramural field. No penalties or fines will be assessed while the new policy is being phased-in, but we are asking you to please observe these smoke-free zones.

Until the official designated smoking areas are established, smoking will be permitted in accordance with the university's previous policy. Outside of the above-mentioned smoke-free zones, smoking will be permitted 20 feet away from a building entrance or air intake vent. Cigarette butts should be properly disposed of in approved containers.

We will continue to update you as we make progress with the implementation process. If you have any questions or suggestions, please don't hesitate to contact us. Thank you.

Three Steps to Fight the Flu

Jim Gindlesperger

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tell us that each year in the United States, on average:

- More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications.
- 20,000 of those hospitalized are children younger than 5 years old.
- 36,000 people die from flu.

Many of these cases were preventable if the following actions had been taken. We can reduce our susceptibility to the flu if we do the same.

First, if you haven't done so already, get a flu shot. The CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and most important step in protecting against this serious disease. This is especially important if you are in one of the high risk categories, such as pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes or heart or lung disease, and people 65 and older. The vaccine can protect you from getting sick from the three main viruses or it can make your illness milder if you get a different flu virus. If you live with or care for someone at high risk you should also get a flu vaccine to protect their high-risk contact.

Second, take good preventive actions. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then throw the tissue in the trash. Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze, or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner. Avoid contact with those exhibiting symptoms. And refrain from touching your eyes, nose, or mouth to avoid spreading germs.

Finally, if you get the flu, take antiviral drugs if your physician recommends them. These are prescription medicines that fight the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing. It should be emphasized, however, that these are not substitutions for getting the vaccine in the first place. Antiviral medicines work best if taken within two days of the onset of symptoms.

One Dozen New Regulations Affecting Higher Education

Madelyn Miller



There are no less than one dozen new regulations that may have an impact on colleges and universities in the near future. Usually, additional regulations mean more work for Environmental Health & Safety and the campus community.

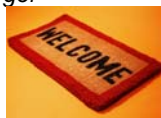
The first one comes from the Environmental Protection Agency (Laboratory Waste Rule) and the second from the Department of Education (Higher Education Opportunity Act). The good news is, the lab rule will loosen some of the regulations on chemical waste generation and the later will require reporting of fires on campus, implementation of emergency communications, development of an emergency response plan and yearly emergency drills. We have had in place all of the emergency response pieces required by this rule and fires at CMU are very rare. All in all, not too onerous. Information on the first two that will go into affect early in 2009 will be forthcoming.

Many of the other ten rules might not affect us but will have an impact on other universities. Because we don't conduct research with select agents, or have spent nuclear materials or possess irradiators, we will not fall under the new laws. However, the Office of Biotechnology Activities (OBA) has promulgated regulations that would require review of all research that might be used for terrorist activities. This law could add additional duties to the Biological Safety Committee. Examples of research that would be scrutinized are drug resistant, highly pathogenic strains of infectious agents that could be used in bio terrorism or something like a new ceramic material that could pierce armor.

There is also movement to expand the Chemical Facility Anti Terrorism Act in 2008 by the Dept. of Homeland Security. Lastly, there is discussion to require that all caulking be tested before disposal to check for PCBs.

Welcome!

Jim Gindlesperger



Welcome to Rick Caruso, our new Fire Safety Manager. Rick is a retired captain in the City of Pittsburgh Fire Department and has brought with him a wealth of expertise. Please join us in welcoming Rick to the university.