

The Radon Remedy

Story by
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BOULDER - Despite warnings from federal Centers for Disease Control, Norton Billington isn't afraid of radon. Billington, a retired Army colonel who says he came down with colon cancer after being exposed to radiation from atomic tests on the Bikini Atoll and Marshall Islands drives here from Florida with his wife each year to sit in a radon health mine.

"It's a different kind of radiation," explained Billington. "It's passive. It does not have any deleterious effect as a cancer agent."

But many less brave visitors have been frightened off in recent years by the radon scare.

Radon, a radioactive gas produced as uranium deteriorates, can be lethal, according to the federal government.

The Environmental Protection Agency warns against radon in homes, saying it causes between 10,000 and 40,000 lung cancer deaths each year.

Radon in groundwater may kill between 30 and 1,800 people a year, it said.

That's a fairly wide estimate because not much is known about low-level radiation.

"There is some uncertainty about the magnitude of radon health risks," admits the EPA... "This is because estimates of radon risks are based on studies of cancer in humans (underground miners). Additional studies on more typical populations are under way."

However, the British Journal of Rheumatology studied radon spa therapy and reported: "This component of rehabilitative intervention can induce beneficial long-term effects."

And Sadao Hattori, director of the Central Research Institute of Electric Power Industry in Japan, concluded that radon therapy actually reduces cancer by stimulating the human immune system.

"We lived in Europe for 22 years, and it's recognized there as a legitimate form of health treatment and recommended by doctors," said Billington.

"By European standards, this place should be booming," he said.

In Montana, the state health department doesn't regulate radon health mines.

"I visited one of those places in 1997 or 1998 and actually went down into one of their little mines," said the state epidemiologist, Dr. Mike Spence.

"They were very courteous to me, but I had to think that anyone would be pretty goofy to go down there," Spence said.

The state Department of Environmental Quality does, however, limit radon exposure to no more than 32 hours a year in the health mines.

"Radon is a gas that attaches to dust and gets in your lungs," explained Kathi Montgomery, an energy education specialist with DEQ in Helena.

"It's radioactive and gives off a tiny burst of energy when its half-life expires, and that creates a greater risk of cancer.

"However, we don't have a good scientific study of people sitting in radon mines," she added. "They're there for a different purpose. We don't have data indicating that they're at any higher risk of getting lung cancer."

Since 1995, the Billingtons have visited the Free Enterprise Health Mine five summers seeking relief for rheumatoid arthritis.

"We do our full 32 hours downstairs, and we don't glow at night," said Rose Billington with a laugh.

Visitors go below on an elevator that descends 85 feet down a mine shaft at about a foot per second.

At the bottom is a 400-foot-long tunnel with a concrete and wooden walkway. Uranium-bearing rocks glitter with quartz crystals along the walls.

Wooden timbers bear the signatures of visitors, and vinyl couches and reading lights periodically punctuate the gloom of the tunnel.

The temperature hovers around 52 degrees, except where there are heaters.

Huddled up on one of the couches is Jan Traupel of Rapid City, who came here after hearing that it could help her fibromyalgia.

“For the past six years, I’ve been in pain, even with narcotics. But now, after five days here, I’m pain-free. It’s amazing to me to have a day without pain,” Traupel said.

Fresh air circulates from a second tunnel 15 feet lower. A third tunnel 150 feet below the surface is filled with water now. Neither are open to the public.

The tunnels were drilled by Wade V. Lewis, who found uranium here in the 1940s and opened the state’s first commercial uranium mine.

Then came another discovery.

“The wife of one of the mining associates suffered from bursitis, but went down into the mine to see the uranium operation and became pain-free,” said Patricia Lewis, current operator of the mine and granddaughter of the founder.

“A friend went down with her and became pain-free as well,” she said.

Soon there were a thousand people visiting the mine for their health and spreading the good tidings.

“They came to the conclusion that they could make more money off people than they could mining uranium,” said Lewis.

In its heyday, 16 radon health spas lined the highway between Helena and Butte, and they drew as many as 10,000 tourists a year.

Today, only a few thousand tourists visit the handful of health mines remaining.

“With the radon controversy, new drugs and joint replacement surgery, we’re all pretty much scrambling,” said Lewis.

Just thinking about the radon controversy sets her off like a bottle bomb.

“Radon in the basement is junk science,” declared Lewis. “It’s just garbage. There are no dead bodies anywhere.

“We have a treasure here that should be promoted, not bashed.”

Jack Fletcher couldn’t agree more. “This mine is a gift from God,” he said.

About eight years ago Fletcher was working on a construction site near Effingham, Ill., when both of his knees blew out, leaving him first on crutches and then in a wheelchair, said Fletcher, a welder.

“I finally went to see the doctor, and he told me both my knees needed to be replaced because the cartilage was completely gone and bone was rubbing on bone,” he said. “The x-ray also showed areas of arthritis.”

Fletcher and his wife were both living in Boulder at the time. He said he called his wife and told her he was in a wheelchair with both legs so swollen he couldn’t walk.

“I drove the truck back, using the cane for the gas and the brakes,” he said. “I drove at night so I wouldn’t be as great a danger to other people.”

When he got back, his wife persuaded him to try radon treatment.

After the first visit, he said, he could take a step, his first in a month.

After the second visit, he said, he felt good enough to try to walk to his truck through a rainstorm.

“May God strike me if I’m exaggerating, I grabbed my crutches, ran through the rain, got to the truck and realized that I was healed,” said Fletcher.

“I got back out of the truck, ran around it and did a little dance in the rain.

“Now my knees are healed. I can jog and play basketball and dance. I can do anything that I want. And I attribute it all to this radon Mine,” Fletcher said.