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Experts and Research Agree: Granite Countertops Do Not Pose Health Risk to Consumers

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CLEVELAND, Aug 11, 2008 /PRNewswire via COMTEX/ -- Consumers can be confident about the safety of granite countertops in their homes, say a growing number of respected experts as well as respected scientific research.

Largely because of recent media reports, granite and radon has become a confusing and emotional issue for consumers, many of whom are afraid to install granite countertops in their homes or are worried about the countertops they already have. Yet -- according to some of the most noted authorities on granite, radon and risk -- their concerns are unfounded.

"A considerable amount of research has been published in peer-reviewed scientific literature and all of it comes to the same conclusion: the levels of radon emitted into the air from a granite countertop are not excessive and not showing any risk for the population in their homes," said Dr. John McCarthy, president of Environmental Health & Engineering, a public health consulting firm in suburban Boston.

McCarthy, who holds degrees from Harvard University and Boston College and has overseen more than 2,500 indoor environmental quality assessments, said some news stories about radon and granite have failed to address the critical role that air dilution plays in testing, measuring and interpreting radon levels in homes.

"To properly measure radon, one must calculate the emission rate in connection with the area of granite and the volume of air in the home," he said. "Much like paint fumes do, radon generally will dilute into a home's air. These concentrated emissions will generally dilute down to harmless levels. To get even close to the type of dangerous levels of radon exposure that's been reported in news articles recently, a consumer would have to completely seal off the room and stay in that room 24/7 -- for 72 years."

Dr. David Ropeick, author of the book "Risk," agreed with McCarthy that recent media reports are needlessly confusing consumers about the safety of granite countertops.

"Compared to all the risks in people's lives, the risk of radon exposure from granite countertops is as close to zero as you could hope to get," Ropeick said. "Granite is a natural stone and some samples emit a tiny amount of radon. It's scary for people to hear that, especially when that's all that's being reported. But many of the reports are looking past the important scientific facts that show with the dilution of air, any amount of radon coming off the stone is negligible."

Health Physics Society (HPS), a scientific and professional organization whose members specialize in occupational and environmental radiation safety and which has no connection to the granite countertop industry, took issue with the New York Times story, "What's Lurking in Your Countertop" published July 24, 2008. According to an HPS fact sheet about the Times story:

-- The procedure used by the contractor was not appropriate (as per Environmental Protection Agency radon measurement methods) and did not provide a real idea of the amount of radon in the ambient kitchen.

-- Even if the measurement had been valid, one measurement result based on one type of granite in one particular home is not an indication of radon exposure in any other kitchen with a granite countertop.

-- The bottom line: No action needs to be taken to remove granite countertops in existing homes.

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Indeed, Health Physics Society President Richard E. Toohy, Ph.D., CHP said that someone spending four hours a day every day of the year in a kitchen with a typical granite countertop would have their chance of cancer increased by just one in two million. By contrast, the chance of contracting cancer each year simply from background radiation in the environment is three in 10,000.

Toohy's perspectives are echoed by the Washington State Department of Health (WSDOH). On its "Radon Outreach Program" website maintained by its Office of Radon Protection, the WSDOH states: "For a person to be exposed to a noticeable amount of radiation, they would have to spend many hours per day lying on the counter. This is unlikely, so the public health risk is extremely low."

Offering yet another view on the safety of granite is the American Association of Radon Scientists and Technologists (AARST). In its "Position Statement: Granite Countertops and Radon Gas" released Aug. 4, AARST states "while natural rocks such as granite may emit some radon gas, the subsequent levels of radon in the building that are attributable to such sources are not typically high."

The AARST statement says that "soil, sand and rock underneath the home are the primary sources of indoor radon gas" and offers the following advice to consumers concerned about the presence of radon in their homes:

"The best approach to reduce radon in the home is to install an active soil depressurization system (ASD) and reduce the entry of radon coming from the soil. In some cases, increasing the entry of outdoor air to the home is an appropriate method to reduce radon levels by dilution and improve indoor air quality. Both of these methods require a qualified radon mitigation professional to design and install the appropriate radon reduction system. Only in extreme cases would removal of the granite be necessary to reduce the radon concentration, assuming appropriate measurements confirm it as the significant source."

Jim Hogan, president of the Marble Institute of America, said he could understand why the issue of granite and radon has become emotional for many consumers, but he encouraged them to consider all the facts.

"We all have to make our own choices and decisions about things in our home," Hogan said. "But the bottom line is that when it comes to countertops, the science tells us there's no reason to make health issues a factor in whether you choose granite."

About the Marble Institute of America

For over 60 years the Marble Institute of America (MIA) has been the world's leading information resource and advocate for the natural dimension stone industry. MIA members include marble, granite, limestone, sandstone, and other natural stone producers and quarriers, fabricators, installers, distributors, and contractors around the world.

SOURCE Marble Institute of America

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