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Methods for sampling and analysis of indoor air

Method 4: Determination of radon

RECONFIRMATION NOTICE

Technical Committee EV-007 has reviewed the content of this publication and in accordance with Standards Australia procedures for reconfirmation, it has been determined that the publication is still valid and does not require change.

Certain documents referenced in the publication may have been amended since the original date of publication. Users are advised to ensure that they are using the latest versions of such documents as appropriate, unless advised otherwise in this Reconfirmation Notice.

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NOTES

Australian Standard®

Methods for sampling and analysis of indoor air

Method 4: Determination of radon

PREFACE

This Standard was prepared by the Joint Standards Australia/Standards New Zealand Committee CH/19 on Methods for Examination of Air. It is one of a series for the sampling and analysis of indoor air.

The objective of this Standard is to provide those involved in the sampling and analysis of indoor air with standardized methods for determination of the radon content of indoor air or reference methods against which other measurement methods can be calibrated or compared.

This Standard is the result of a consensus among representatives on the Joint Committee to produce it as an Australian Standard.

The terms 'normative' and 'informative' have been used in this Standard to define the application of the appendix to which they apply. A 'normative' appendix is an integral part of a Standard, whereas an 'informative' appendix is only for information and guidance.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	2
SECTION 1 SCOPE AND GENERAL	
1.1 SCOPE	4
1.2 PRINCIPLE	4
1.3 REFERENCED DOCUMENT	5
SECTION 2 COLLECTION IN SCINTILLATION CELLS AND MEASUREMENT OF ALPHA ACTIVITY (METHOD A)	
2.1 APPARATUS	6
2.2 PROCEDURE	6
2.3 CALCULATIONS	7
SECTION 3 ADSORPTION ONTO ACTIVATED CHARCOAL AND MEASUREMENT OF GAMMA RADIATION (METHOD B)	
3.1 REAGENT	9
3.2 APPARATUS	9
3.3 PROCEDURE	9
3.4 CALCULATIONS	12

	<i>Page</i>
SECTION 4 SOLID-STATE NUCLEAR TRACK MONITORING (METHOD C)	
4.1 REAGENTS	13
4.2 APPARATUS	13
4.3 PROCEDURE	14
4.4 CALCULATION	15
SECTION 5 PRECISION AND TEST REPORT	
5.1 PRECISION	16
5.2 TEST REPORT	16
APPENDICES	
A URANIUM DECAY SERIES	17
B DETERMINATION OF RADON PROGENY CONCENTRATIONS BY MEMBRANE FILTER COLLECTION AND MEASUREMENT OF ALPHA ACTIVITY	19

FOREWORD

The term ‘radon’ strictly applies to any one of the isotopes of the element with atomic number 86. These isotopes are colourless, odourless, chemically inert, radioactive gases. The principal isotope, which occurs naturally as a member of the ^{238}U radioactive decay series, is ^{222}Rn (historically known as ‘radon’), which has a half-life of 3.82 d. ^{220}Rn (historically known as ‘thoron’) is produced from the radioactive decay of ^{232}Th , and has a half-life of 55 s. The third naturally occurring isotope, ^{219}Rn , is called ‘actinon’ and originates from the radioactive decay of ^{235}U ; because the half-life of ^{235}U is much smaller than that of either ^{238}U and ^{232}Th and also because the half-life of ^{219}Rn is small (19 s), ^{219}Rn occurs naturally in negligibly small quantities. For simplicity, throughout the remainder of this document the historical names ‘radon’ and ‘thoron’ will refer to ^{222}Rn and ^{220}Rn respectively.

NOTE: A summary of the ^{238}U decay series is given in Appendix A.

^{226}Ra (radium) has a half-life of 1602 years. Since this is much longer than the half-life of any subsequent uranium progeny such as radon, ^{226}Ra can be regarded as a fixed-rate generator of ^{222}Rn , which has a half-life of 3.82 d. Radioactive equilibrium between radon progeny $^{218}\text{Po}(\text{RaA})$, $^{214}\text{Pb}(\text{RaB})$ and $^{214}\text{Bi}(\text{RaC})$ is achieved after approximately three hours (in the absence of processes which compete with the radioactive decay of the nuclides. After a $^{214}\text{Bi}(\text{RaC})$ decay (half-life of 19.7 min), the $^{214}\text{Po}(\text{RaC}')$ decays almost immediately (164 μs) to $^{210}\text{Pb}(\text{RaD})$, which has a 22-year half-life, effectively blocking the decay chain for normal measurement periods. Since ^{214}Po and ^{214}Bi are always in radioactive equilibrium, the relatively high energy 7.69 MeV alpha particle radiated from ^{214}Po is normally used when measuring ^{214}Bi . The mobility of the radon gas and the relatively short decay times for the subsequent radon progeny leads to a natural division between the radon decay chain and the rest of the uranium decay series. This applies both to measurement methods and to the associated health risk. The half-lives of thoron and its progeny combine to produce a much lesser hazard than that from radon and its progeny in most circumstances. The rest of this discussion is therefore based on radon. However, the same general principles can be applied to the thoron decay series.

Inhalation of elevated concentrations of radon progeny increases the risk of cancer occurring in the respiratory tract, because the biological half-lives of the radon progeny in the respiratory tract are longer than their radioactive half-lives. Most of the inhaled radon progeny therefore decay in the respiratory tract, emitting gamma radiation, beta particles and the more damaging high energy alpha particles. Since these alpha particles are readily stopped in tissue, most of their energy will be deposited in respiratory tract tissue; this has the potential to cause respiratory tract cancer.

Under normal atmospheric conditions, the dose to the lung can be determined from the measurement of the potential alpha energy concentration (PAEC) of the three radon progeny ^{218}Po , ^{214}Bi and ^{214}Pb . The historical unit of measurement of PAEC for radon progeny is the radon working level (WL). The WL(Rn) is defined as any combination of the short-lived decay products of radon in one litre of air which results in the ultimate emission of 1.3×10^5 MeV of alpha particle energy. In terms of the individual number concentrations N_A , N_B and N_C of the radon progeny $^{218}\text{Po}(\text{RaA})$, $^{214}\text{Pb}(\text{RaB})$ and $^{214}\text{Bi}(\text{RaC})$ respectively, the radon working level is given by the following equation:

$$\text{WL} = (13.69N_A + 7.69N_B + 7.69N_C)/1.3 \times 10^5 \quad \dots (1)$$

In terms of the activity concentrations, this equation converts to the following:

$$\text{WL} = (0.0278C_A + 0.1370C_B + 0.1008C_C)/1000 \quad \dots (2)$$

where C_A , C_B and C_C for ^{218}Po , ^{214}Pb and ^{214}Bi respectively are activity concentrations, in becquerels per cubic metre (Bq/m^3).

The preferred SI unit for PAEC is now joules per cubic metre (J/m^3) and one WL equals $2.08 \times 10^{-5} \text{ J/m}^3$. The PAEC in joules per cubic metre is thus given by the following equation:

$$\text{PAEC} = (5.79C_A + 28.6C_B + 21.0C_C) \times 10^{-10} \quad \dots (3)$$

where C_A , C_B and C_C are as previously defined.

When radon and thoron are formed they can diffuse through soil and rock pore spaces and can escape to the atmosphere if the diffusion time to the solid/air interface is no more than a few half-lives of the isotope. As ^{238}U and ^{226}Ra are widely distributed in trace concentrations in many types of rock and soil, radon is being continuously released to become a trace constituent of the 'soil gas' which exists in soils and dissolves to some extent in underground water. The 'soil gas' diffuses into the atmosphere, and enters houses and buildings of which the lowest levels or basements are within or in close proximity to the ground (including the 'pier and crawl-space' type of house commonly constructed in Australia).

The concentration of radon which accumulates in buildings or houses is governed by the radium content of the underlying soil, the porosity of the soil and channelling produced by geological structures, the availability and dimensions of cracks or other openings between the house interior and the soil, the pressure differential between the soil gas and the interior of the building, and the ventilation rate of the building. Where surveys have been conducted it has been found that the radon content of the atmosphere in the building is higher than that of the atmosphere outside the building, frequently by as much as one or even two orders of magnitude (and in rare instances by more than three orders of magnitude).

The International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) has suggested* advisory levels to limit dosages of indoor radon (20 mSv per year as an action level, and 10 mSv per year for new construction); these figures represent an annual exposure to an average radon concentration on 228 Bq/m^3 and 114 Bq/m^3 respectively)†. The Radiation Health Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have suggested an advisory exposure level of 200 Bq/m^3 for Australian homes. An Australia-wide survey‡ has shown that the average level of radon in Australian homes is approximately 12 Bq/m^3 , and that 0.1 percent of the homes surveyed have radon levels above the advisory level recommended by the Radiation Health Committee.

* INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON RADIOLOGICAL PROTECTION. *Lung cancer risk from indoor exposures to radon daughters*. Oxford: Pergamon Press ICRP Publication 50 Ann. ICRP, Vol. 17, No.1, 1987, p.1-60.

† IBID, sec 3.3.

‡ LANGROO, M.K., WISE, K.N., DUGGLEBY, J.C. and KOTLER, L.H. *A nation-wide survey of radon and gamma radiation in Australian homes*. Australian Radiation Laboratory Technical Report AR/LTR090 (ISSN 0157-1400), April 1990.

METHOD

SECTION 1 SCOPE AND GENERAL

1.1 SCOPE This Standard sets out three methods for the determination of the radon content of indoor air. The methods are as follows:

- (a) *Collection in scintillation cells and measurement of alpha activity (Method A)** Applicable for grab samples (sampling times of a few seconds) and providing a rapid means of obtaining a radon concentration at a particular time. Its detection limit is dependent on the background count rate. For a background count rate of 1 count/min and a counting period of 60 min, the lower detection limit is 40 Bq/m³. For a scintillation cell with a sampling volume of 140cm³, the sensitivity of the method is approximately 0.019 counts/min per Bq/m³ in air.†
- (b) *Passive adsorption onto activated charcoal and measurement of gamma radiation (Method B)* Applicable for short term sampling (between 1 d and 7 d). The detection limit is approximately 15 Bq/m³ for an exposure period of 4 d and counting period of 60 min.
- (c) *Solid-state nuclear track monitoring (Method C)* Applicable for sampling periods from one week to one year. The detection limit is 3 Bq/m³ for an exposure period of one year and a counting area of 1.5 cm².

Methods for the determination of the concentrations of certain radon progeny, by membrane filter collection and measurement of alpha activity, and estimation of the total potential alpha energy concentration (PAEC) of radon progeny in indoor air are included in Appendix B. A sampling period of 5 min is used and, for the count intervals specified, this method should give a lower detection limit of 2.5×10^{-8} J/m³ for the PAEC of the radon progeny.‡

NOTES:

- 1 The recommended advisory level for radon in dwellings is expressed as a radon concentration in air, in becquerel per cubic metre, while actual radiation doses are calculated from the measurement of the concentration of the radon progeny in the air. The methods in Appendix B have been included for use in situations where measured radon concentrations are high enough to warrant further investigation.
- 2 The detection limits for each method have been estimated using the procedure given by Currie (published in *Analytical Chemistry*§)

1.2 PRINCIPLE

1.2.1 Method A An instantaneous sample of air equal to the volume of the scintillation cell is collected when a previously evacuated cell is opened to the atmosphere. The alpha particles from the decay of radon and radon progeny produce scintillations through interaction with the phosphor coating on the inner surfaces of the cell. Following a

* LUCAS, H.F. Improved low-level alpha scintillation counter for radon. *Review of Scientific Instruments*, Vol. 28, 1957, p. 680-683.

† GAN, T.H., SOLOMON, S.B., and PEGGIE, J.R. Standardization of Rn-222 at the Australian Radiation Laboratory. *Journal of Research of the National Institute of Standards and Technology*, No. 95, 1990, p. 171-175.

‡ NAZAROFF, W.W. Optimising the total-alpha three-count technique for measuring concentrations of radon progeny in residences. *Health Physics*. No. 46, 1984, p. 395-404.

§ CURRIE, L.A. Limits for qualitative detection and quantitative determination. *Analytical Chemistry*, Vol. 40, 1968, p. 586-593.

sufficient period of time, to allow for in-growth of the short-lived radon progeny, the window end of the scintillation cell is placed directly on top of a photomultiplier tube in a light-tight enclosure and the light pulses produced by the interaction of the alpha particles with the scintillant are converted into electronic pulses which are amplified and counted with a discriminator/scaler over a predetermined count interval*.

1.2.2 Method B A radon monitor consisting of activated charcoal in a shallow circular container (a diffusion barrier over the charcoal is optional) is placed in the indoor space to be tested and the radon in the air is adsorbed quantitatively onto the surface of the activated charcoal. As the sampling rate of the monitor is determined by its design, the properties of the charcoal and the atmospheric conditions†, the monitor system is calibrated in a radon test chamber before any monitors are used. After the sampling period, and a delay sufficient to ensure that the radon progeny formed in the sample are in equilibrium with the radon, the intensities of the gamma radiations at three particular energies are determined by gamma-ray spectrometry and used to calculate the average radon concentration over the exposure period.

1.2.3 Method C A radon monitor consisting of an alpha-sensitive plastic strip in a closed container, whose seal allows entry of gases, including radon, but excludes the entry of radon progeny, is placed in the area to be sampled for the sampling period. Radon enters the container and alpha particles produced within the container from the decay of radon and its short-lived progeny form small tracks in the plastic. At the end of the exposure period, the plastic material is etched to accentuate these tracks and the area density of the tracks is determined. The area track density is converted to an average radon concentration using a calibration factor determined by exposing monitors of the same type to known radon concentrations and determining the area density of tracks on these monitors.

1.3 REFERENCED DOCUMENT The following document is referred to in this Standard:

AS

3640 Workplace atmospheres—Method for sampling and gravimetric determination of inspirable dust.

* NATIONAL COMMISSION ON RADIOLOGICAL PROTECTION. *Measurement of radon and radon daughters in air*. NCRP Report No. 97, 1988, p. 46-50.

† LODGE, J.P. (Ed) *Method of air sampling and analysis* 3rd ed. Michigan: Lewis Publishers, 1989, p. 474-477.

SECTION 2 COLLECTION IN SCINTILLATION CELLS AND MEASUREMENT OF ALPHA ACTIVITY (METHOD A)

2.1 APPARATUS

2.1.1 Scintillation cell—of between 100 cm³ and 200 cm³ in volume and consisting of a sample flask coated on the inside with a silver-activated zinc sulfide coating apart from a clean window on one face of the flask which may be coated with a thin, transparent, conductive coating of tin(IV)oxide. This face is placed against the photomultiplier tube during counting. One or more valves are provided through which the flask can be evacuated and filled. An example of a suitable flask, the Lucas cell, is shown in Figure 1.

NOTE: Although reliability is an important attribute of the scintillation cell, the following sources of error need to be avoided:

- (a) Imperfect valves causing sample loss.
- (b) Inadequate evacuation leading to the sampling of a smaller volume than expected.
- (c) Uneven deposition of radon progeny on non-conductive cell walls. This effect is usually small and, if necessary, can be remedied by the application of a conductive coating. The use of a conductive coating should not be necessary if the cathode of the photomultiplier tube is kept at or near zero volts.

2.1.2 Vacuum pump—for the evacuation of the cells prior to sampling. A two-stage rotary pump which can reduce the pressure in the cell to less than 100 Pa is sufficient.

2.1.3 Photomultiplier tube (PMT)—connected to an amplifier and discriminator/scaler so that alpha scintillations can be counted.

2.1.4 Light-tight enclosure—for housing the photomultiplier tube during the counting procedure.

2.1.5 Reference radon chamber or standard radium source

NOTE: For users who do not wish to maintain their own radium solutions, standards or radon test chambers, there are radon calibration services available at a number of Commonwealth and State laboratories, in particular the ARL and ANSTO organizations.

2.2 PROCEDURE

2.2.1 Calibration of scintillation cell The scintillation cell shall be calibrated as follows:

- (a) Evacuate the cell and then fill it with a known quantity of radon. The cell may be filled from a reference radon chamber or by transferring to it a known quantity of radon produced from a standard radium source.
- (b) Allow a 3 h ingrowth period for radon progeny to be produced.
- (c) Measure the count rate for the cell by placing the clear window of the cell on the PMT.
- (d) Determine the ratio of the measured count rate to the known radon activity in the cell to obtain the cell efficiency (e), in counts/minute per becquerel of activity in the cell.

2.2.2 Sample collection The sample shall be collected as follows:

- (a) Evacuate the scintillation cell and close the valve.
- (b) Measure the background count rate for the cell by placing the evacuated cell on the PMT and recording the count rate.

- (c) Move the scintillation cell to the indoor area to be sampled. The sampling location should be chosen to yield a sample which is representative of the air breathed by the occupants of the indoor area being monitored. Samples should normally be taken at a height of between 1 m and 2 m above the floor level. Areas close to walls, where the air may be stagnant, or where there are obvious draughts should be avoided, unless these areas are truly representative of the indoor area under study.
- (d) When the sample is required, open the valve to bring the cell to atmospheric pressure.
- (e) Close the valve and note the time of sample collection.

2.2.3 Measurement of alpha activity The alpha activity of the sample shall be measured as follows:

- (a) Allow radon progeny ingrowth for at least 3 h between sampling and counting. Note the length of this ingrowth period in minutes (t).
NOTE: The sensitivity of this method decreases as the delay between sampling and counting increases. Half the radon collected will decay in approximately 4 d.
- (b) Place the clear window of the scintillation cell on the PMT.
- (c) Measure the total sample counts over an appropriate count interval (ΔT), typically 60 min.

2.3 CALCULATIONS The radon activity shall be calculated* from the following equation:

$$C_{\text{Rn}} = \frac{X \lambda_{\text{Rn}} \exp(\lambda_{\text{Rn}} t)}{\epsilon V (1 - \exp(-\lambda_{\text{Rn}} \Delta T))} \quad \dots 2.3(1)$$

where

- C_{Rn} = radon (^{222}Rn) concentration in the sample, in becquerels per cubic metre
- X = number of counts above background for the sample over the counting time
- λ_{Rn} = radon decay constant ($1.258 \times 10^{-4}/\text{min}$)
- t = time elapsed between the end of sampling and the start of counting, in minutes
- ϵ = cell efficiency, in counts/minute per becquerel of activity in the cell
- V = cell volume, in cubic metres
- ΔT = count interval, in minutes

If the count interval (ΔT) is very much less than the half-life of radon (3.82 d), then Equation 2.3(1) can be approximated by the following:

$$C_{\text{Rn}} = \frac{X}{\epsilon V \Delta T} (\exp(\lambda_{\text{Rn}} t)) \quad \dots 2.3(2)$$

The count interval, ΔT , is selected to give a relative error of less than $\pm 5\%$. In practice, count times of 30 to 60 min are typical, so that Equation 2.3(2) can be used.

* LEACH, V.A. and LOKAN K.H. *Monitoring employee exposure to radon and its daughters in uranium mines*. In Australian Radiation Laboratory Report ARL/TR011. Yallambie: Department of Community Services and Health, 1979.