You might have heard of granite in the news recently - not for its beauty or practicality, but for its potential dangers.

With the increased popularity of granite in kitchens, there have been reports that some of these natural stones emit radon - a radioactive gas that can seep into the air but can be eliminated by ventilation - as well as radiation, which cannot. Both elements can cause cancer, and the U.S. Surgeon General has warned that "indoor radon" is the second-leading cause of lung cancer, after smoking.

Given the ubiquity of granite in new and redone kitchens across Long Island, should you worry whether you and your family are being poisoned by your countertops?

Probably not, says Dave Ryan, a spokesman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Washington. But you should be concerned enough about radon to test for it.

The EPA recommends that everyone test their homes for excessive radon emissions, whether they have granite or not, since most radon comes from the soil. (Radon is not generally a problem on Long Island because of the sandy soil.) "The really important issue is testing your air," said Ryan. "It's much more important than worrying about radon in countertops."

Ryan said that the EPA, which doesn't regulate indoor air quality, isn't logging complaints about granite countertops. It has done no studies itself and is not evaluating other studies, he said.

Some studies have been done, however. One scientist who is looking into the potential dangers of granite is William Llope, a senior faculty fellow at Rice University in Houston, who said he became curious about the matter when a TV station asked him to test granite counters in a kitchen. He did, using a gamma-ray spectrometer, which he says is more sophisticated than a Geiger counter, and was alarmed when he found radiation in five places on the countertop far higher than the normal "background" levels that surround people at all times. He said he is analyzing samples, some of which have excessive radon and radiation, and will be publishing his results.

"I don't want anyone to get the impression that granite is dangerous as a rule," said Llope. "Most stones that I've looked at are not what people would necessarily consider 'hot.' But there are some."

Not all granite is alike, he said. It comes from something like 60 countries and 1,000 providers. He urged people to test their granite.
A New York State Department of Health research scientist, Michael Kitto, has tested more than 50 stones. "Results indicate that many of the decorative stones are very low emitters of radon," he wrote. "A few stones emit slightly more radon, and only one stone in the study emitted a substantial amount of radon. While nearly all granites emit radon, the amount produced in a kitchen from the granite is less than in outdoor air."

There are inexpensive home radon testing kits available through the New York State Department of Health (518-402-7556 for $6.75; up to eight weeks for delivery), or at stores such as The Home Depot, where a kit by Pro-Lab in the plumbing aisle costs about $15, not including lab analysis. Or you can purchase one online at homestoreproducts.com for $39.95, including the lab fee.

If tests show a high level of radon, go to epa.gov/radon, buildclean.org, or call the National Safety Council's Radon Hotline at 800-767-7236 (RADON) 24 hours a day.