

What to Do About Mold

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Recent rains can contribute to mold growth. A water leak, roof leak or just moisture from the air can develop mold in and around your home. Mold can grow anywhere there is moisture. Scientific evidence has linked mold to asthma symptoms in chronic sufferers, as well as to coughing and upper respiratory tract symptoms in otherwise healthy people, says a report from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies in 2004. Damp conditions have also been associated with the onset of asthma and lower respiratory illness in healthy children.

Most symptoms of mold exposure are due to an allergic reaction. Because only a percentage of the population has an allergic reaction to any single allergen, only a percentage of the population will be allergic to mold. There may be four people in a home and only one person will be experiencing symptoms due to the exposure. Infection from toxic mold is rare.

A study sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention examined whether mold and indoor dampness are linked to fatigue, neurological disorders, or other microbial infections that people have attributed to mold. The results show that infections from molds that grow in indoor environments are *not* a common occurrence, except in certain susceptible populations, such as those with immune compromise from disease or drug treatment. Infections occur because some molds can produce mycotoxins. Toxic molds vary depending on where they grow and growing conditions. *Stachybotrys*, or “black mold” is generally known as toxic but current information does not indicate that it is more (or less) of a health concern than other types of mold. The mold spores are cast off in blooms that occur during the mold’s cycle stage. Spores have the highest concentrations of toxins, but it may also be found in the vegetative portion of the mold.

Many molds are black, so “Black Mold” frequently is not *Stachybotrys*. This organism has a high moisture requirement, so it grows where moisture has accumulated from roof or wall leaks, or chronically wet areas from plumbing leaks. Persons handling material heavily contaminated with this mold describe symptoms of cough, burning sensations of the mouth and nasal passages, and irritation at the point of contact, especially in areas of heavy perspiration. There are insufficient studies to establish cause and effect relationships between indoor *Stachybotrys* exposure and illness, young children and the elderly appear to be more susceptible.

There appears to be a cumulative effect to exposure to mold. A person who has no symptoms today may become sensitized and have health symptoms later if they are exposed to a moldy environment for an extended period.

Even though specific symptoms may not be able to be clearly proven to come from mold exposure, there is consensus that it is not healthy to live or work in a moldy

environment. Some individuals react to mold whether it is living or dead. The mold should be removed either way. When removing mold, protect your health by using a respirator or two-strap mask to filter out mold spores, wearing eye protection and using rubber gloves. Suggested masks are N-95, 3M #1860 or TC-21C. Immediately wash clothes after completing removal of mold.

It is impossible to completely remove mold from porous surfaces such as paper, drywall and carpet padding, so these materials should be removed and discarded. To remove mold from the surface of non-porous materials, first scrub with a brush and detergent solution. Ventilate the work area well. Then disinfect with a chlorine bleach solution. A clean surface requires less bleach than a dirty surface. A solution of ¼ cup chlorine bleach to 1 gallon of water should be adequate for clean surfaces. Leave the bleach solution on the surface for 15 minutes, then rinse with water and dry quickly. Just splashing full-strength bleach on mold is not effective. It must be cleaned.

Air cleaners and ozone machines will not solve a mold problem. A high-efficiency air filter that removes mold spores may reduce the number of spores in the air, but the spores rapidly settle onto surfaces where air filters cannot remove them. If structural wood pieces, like studs, have stood in water, they need time to dry out. Moisture meters are available at local home stores. These meters will show if the wood is below 15 percent moisture. If it is, you can replace drywall and similar materials. Even if the wood feels dry, it may still be too wet for rebuilding.

Moisture problems must be fixed to prevent future mold growth. Since there are mold spores everywhere and since mold grows on any wet organic surface, the only way to prevent mold growth is to keep things dry.

Additional information on family and community development is available from UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Services, 1100 Simonton Street #2-260, Key West, FL, 33040; phone 305-451-4234; e-mail Monroe@ifas.ufl.edu or visit the Web site at <http://monroe.ifas.ufl.edu>. *Our services are free and available to all without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin.*