

Help Yourself to a Healthy Home **Mold and Moisture**

SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

Mold produces “spores,” tiny specks you can’t see and that float through the air. When you breathe in mold spores, they get into your lungs. This can cause health problems. People with allergies to mold may have reactions. They include watery eyes, runny or stuffed up noses, sneezing, itching, wheezing, trouble breathing, headaches, and tiredness. Mold can even trigger asthma attacks.

We are learning more about the health problems mold causes. Some molds can cause severe problems in some people, but scientists disagree about what the problems are. Mold is almost everywhere, but it is not healthy to live where mold is growing. Because mold needs moisture to grow, try to keep your home and everything in it dry. Here are some places you might find mold:

- In bathrooms, especially around the shower or tub
- In wet or damp basements and crawl spaces
- Around leaky bathroom and kitchen sinks
- In attics under leaking roofs
- On wet clothes that are not dried quickly
- On windows and walls where condensation collects
- In closets
- Under wallpaper or carpet
- In your air conditioner

Most of us have seen mold or moisture around the home. But did you know that mold is alive? It grows on wet or damp surfaces. It is often gray or black but can also be white, orange, or green. It can grow out in the open, on places like walls, clothes, and appliances. But you may also find it in more hidden places—under carpets or in walls and attics. Mold often smells musty. Mildew is a common name for mold. If you live near the ocean or in a damp climate, there may be more mold in your home than in homes in other places

It is important to fix any moisture problem in your home right away. Mold can grow fast, so it’s best not to wait. To stop mold from growing, quickly dry or throw away anything that has gotten wet.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

How is your family's health?

- Does anyone have allergies or asthma?
- Does anyone in your home always seem to have a cold—a runny nose, wheezing, coughing and headaches?
- Do these problems go away when they leave home for a while?
- Are their infants, children, or elderly people living in the household?

How can you tell if mold is growing in your home?

- Can you see mold growing anywhere?
- Is there mildew growing on clothes or towels?
- Does any part of your house or apartment smell musty or moldy?
- Do you see color changes on walls or floors that you can't wipe off?

Is there moisture in your home that could cause mold to grow?

- Has any part of your home been flooded?
- Has there been a water leak or overflow?
- Has the carpet gotten wet and stayed damp for more than 24 hours?
- Can you see moisture on walls, ceilings, or windows?
- Do bathroom walls stay damp for a long time after a bath or shower?
- Do basement floor drains ever get clogged and hold water?
- Does your basement or roof leak when it rains? (Check the attic floor.)
- Does anyone use a humidifier?
- Does water collect in the drain pan under the refrigerator or air conditioner?
- Do you use unvented space heaters?
- Is there a crawl space under the house?
- Do you live in a humid climate?
- Does rainwater drain toward your home's foundation?
- If your home is raised, does water pool under it?
- Does the air in your home feel clammy or humid?

ACTION STEPS

- Use downspouts to direct rainwater away from the house. Make sure your gutters are working.
- Slope the dirt away from your house's foundation. Make sure the dirt is lower six feet away from the house than it is next to it.
- Repair leaking roofs, walls, doors, or windows.
- Keep surfaces clean and dry—wipe up spills and overflows right away.
- Store clothes and towels clean and dry—do not let them stay wet in the laundry basket or washing machine.
- Don't leave water in drip pans, basements, and air conditioners.
- Check the relative humidity in your home. You can buy a kit to do this at a home electronics or hardware store. Stop using your humidifier if the relative humidity is more than 50%.
- If the humidity is high don't keep a lot of houseplants.
- Wipe down shower walls with a squeegee or towel after bathing or showering.
- Cut down the steam in the bathroom while bathing or showering. Run a fan that is vented to the outside or open a window.
- Run a fan vented to the outside when cooking.
- If you have a dryer, make sure it is vented to the outside.
- Use a dehumidifier or air conditioner to dry out damp areas.
- If you use a humidifier, rinse it out with water every day. Every few days, follow the manufactures directions for cleaning it or rinse it out with a mix of ½ cup of chlorine bleach (sometimes called *sodium hypochlorite*. Clorox is one brand) and one gallon of water.
- When you use your air conditioner, use the “auto fan” setting.
- Throw away wet carpeting, cardboard boxes, insulation, or other things that have been wet for more than two days.
- Increase airflow in problem areas—open closet doors and move furniture away from outside walls where mold is growing. Move your furniture around once in a while.
- Prevent moisture from collecting on windows by using storm windows. If you live in an apartment, talk to your landlord about putting on storm windows.
- Keep people with asthma or allergies away from damp areas of your home.
- Cover window wells if they leak.
- After cleaning up mold, using a high efficiency (HEPA) vacuum or air cleaner may help to get rid of mold spores in the air. You may be able to borrow a HEPA vacuum. Call your local or state health department to ask.
- If you find an area of mold greater than 15 square feet, it's best to hire a professional to get rid of it. (You can find them listed in the telephone book under “Fire and Water Damage Restoration.”)

- Clean up mold with a mix of laundry detergent or dishwashing soap and water OR chlorine bleach with soap and water. Do not mix chlorine bleach with any product that contains ammonia.
- If you think mold may be causing your or your family health problems, see a doctor.

HOW DO I CLEAN UP MOLD?

Protect yourself when cleaning up mold. Wear long sleeves and pants, shoes and socks, rubber gloves, and goggles to protect your eyes. Open a window to let in fresh air while you are working.

Throw away things like carpet or mattresses, wallboard (drywall), ceiling tile, insulation, or cardboard boxes that have been wet for more than two days. Wrap anything you're going to throw away in plastic to stop mold from spreading. Cleaning up mold puts the spores in the air so it's a good idea to wear a respirator. Keep small children, elderly, sick people, and anyone with allergies or asthma away during cleanup.

Clean hard surfaces with a mix of laundry detergent or dishwashing soap and water. You may have to scrub with a brush. Rinse the area with clean water and dry quickly by wiping away the water and using a fan. Chlorine bleach will kill mold growing on surfaces. It does not kill mold spores in the air, and dead mold can still cause allergic reactions. If you use bleach, follow these steps:

- Scrub the surface first with water and detergent.
- Water down the chlorine bleach—use about one cup bleach to ten cups of water.
- Spray or sponge the bleach on the moldy area. Leave it on about 15 minutes, then rinse the area and dry quickly.
- Never mix chlorine bleach with products that contain ammonia or acids because you will make a deadly gas.
- Keep chlorine bleach out of the reach of pets and children.
- Remember, chlorine bleach takes the color out of most fabrics and rugs. Be careful not to spill or splash.

The Cooperative Extension Service or your local or state health department can provide more information on mold. Renters should talk to their landlords. Some home insurance policies will pay to fix mold damage. Fire and Water Damage Restoration professionals can help you fix the damage. Cleaning up a big mold problem may cost several thousand dollars or more.

WHAT ABOUT TESTING FOR MOLD?

You may have heard about so-called “toxic” molds that can cause severe health problems. This may cause worry if you know that mold is growing in your home. See your doctor if you think mold is causing health problems for you or your family. Many experts agree that health problems come more from the length of time you’ve been in contact with the mold in your home than the type of mold in your home.

No matter what kind of mold you have, you need to get rid of it and fix the moisture problems that made it grow. Most experts think it’s better to spend your time and money on cleaning up the problem than testing. So act quickly to get rid of the mold and moisture by following the action steps in this chapter.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Your local county Extension Office—look in your telephone book.
- Your local or state health department—look in your telephone book.
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—www.epa.gov/iaq
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—www.cdc.gov/nceh/asthma/factsheets/molds
- California Indoor Air Quality Program—www.cal-iaq.org/iaqsheet.htm
- The Health House—www.healthhouse.org
- Healthy Indoor Air for America’s Homes
- 406/994-3451—www.montana.edu/wwwcxair

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