

Understanding Molds

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Neither animal nor insect, molds are microscopic living organisms that are able to thrive where no other life form can.

They can be both destructive and beneficial. Molds are utilized in making various foods (i.e. cheese, beverages), speed decay of garbage (biodegradation), and fertilize gardens. Penicillin and enzymes are made from molds. However, molds can also be disease producing, i.e. provoke mild allergic reactions or have permanent deleterious effects.

Opportunistic Fungus

Molds are fungi that grow in the form of multicellular filaments called hyphae, and reproduce through small spores. There are thousands of known species of mold. Spores of mold are carried by the wind and predominate in the summer and early fall. In warm climates, they can actually thrive year-round. In the fall, they grow on rotting logs and fallen leaves, especially in moist, shady areas. In gardens, they can be found in compost piles and on certain grasses and weeds.

Like all fungi, molds derive energy not through photosynthesis, but from the organic matter in which they live, in damp and dark places such as under the sink, and in the bathroom, basement or refrigerator. They can also flourish in the air, soil, on dead leaves and on other organic material. Molds can be found wherever there is moisture, oxygen, and something to feed on – and can even survive after the moisture has dried up. Fortunately, the molds you see on hard surfaces such as shower tiles are usually not very toxic.

Moisture invites mold. It can grow in places where fresh food is stored such as refrigerator drip trays, houseplants, humidifiers, garbage pails, mattresses, upholstered furniture and foam rubber pillows. The worst place mold can grow is inside wet, porous surfaces such as dry wall, soft wood flooring, carpeting and ceiling tiles where it can feed on cellulose and other organic materials. This is very common if there has been a plumbing leak or inadequate roofing. Of note, it doesn't take major external or internal flooding for toxic mold to take hold. Minor basement seepage and under sink leakage are culprits as well.

Allergic Reactions

Approximately 25 million Americans suffer from allergic reactions to molds, and there are many possible responses to mold/fungal exposure, ranging from minor to severe. For those with minor reactions, most don't realize that their sneezing and sniffing could be caused by fungi. Once they leave the affected area, they recover with few side effects.

But exposure to other molds can have significant health impacts. Most people do not know about the severe health hazards created by some types of indoor household molds. Certain molds produce toxins called mycotoxins. Airborne mycotoxins can destroy one's health. Many times people are unaware that they are breathing mold spores and mycotoxins until they are very ill.

Exposure to dangerous molds such as *Stachybotrys Chartarum* (black mold) or *Chaetomium* could cause a myriad of serious symptoms and illnesses such as chronic bronchitis, learning disabilities, heart problems, cancer, chronic fatigue, lupus, fibromyalgia, and multiple chemical sensitivities. Under specific growth and environmental conditions, *Chaetomium* and *Stachybotrys Chartarum* release toxic microscopic spores and several types of mycotoxins that can cause irreversible health issues such as neurological and immunological damage.

Often, medication, diet, and other treatment protocols are necessary. Nevertheless, some health problems may remain permanently such as brain damage and weakened immune systems. Changes in eyesight, hearing, memory and coordination/balance are generally the most common residual effects that often do not improve after treatment.

The most disturbing factor about airborne mycotoxins is that it is impossible to know how much damage they have caused to one's health until it is too late. Thus, it is extremely important to not knowingly expose oneself (even for brief periods of time) to any place that smells moldy or has an appearance of mold or mildew. If one suspects the air quality of their home is being compromised by mold spores, they can have the air tested.

Get Rid Of It

Many state health agencies are aware of the dangers of toxic molds. Health agencies often have regulations requiring landlords and selling homeowners to remove everything that contains mold. Removing mold is costly because sections of housing need to be removed and replaced. Intense cleaning using lots of ventilation is done between removing and re-installing dwelling sections.

Avoid giving mold the opportunity to take hold anywhere in your home. Repair leaks, remove standing water, and have your home inspected periodically for dry rot, signs of leakage, or other damage that may create a favorable environment for mold to establish itself. Do it for your health's sake. SM