

### **ABOUT MOLD**

#### **What are Molds?**

Molds are simple, microscopic organisms, present virtually everywhere, indoors and outdoors. Molds, along with mushrooms and yeasts, are *fungi* and are needed to break down dead material and recycle nutrients in the environment. For molds to grow and reproduce, they need only a food source, any organic material, such as leaves, wood, paper, or dirt and moisture. Because molds grow by digesting the organic material, they gradually destroy whatever they grow on. Mold growth on surfaces can often be seen in the form of discoloration, frequently green, gray, brown, or black but also white and other colors. Molds release countless tiny, lightweight spores, which travel through the air.

#### **Can mold become a problem in my home?**

Molds will grow and multiply whenever conditions are right; when sufficient moisture is available and when organic material is present. Be on the lookout in your home for common sources of indoor moisture that may lead to mold problems. Warping floors and discoloration of walls and ceilings can be indications of moisture problems.

#### **Should I be concerned about mold in my home?**

Yes, if indoor mold contamination is extensive, it can cause very high and persistent airborne spore exposures. Persons exposed to high spore levels can become sensitized and develop allergies to the mold or other health problems. Mold growth can damage your furnishings, such as carpets, sofas and cabinets. Clothes and shoes in damp closets can become soiled. In time, unchecked mold growth can cause serious damage to the structural elements in your home.

### **DETECTION OF MOLD**

#### **How can I tell if I have mold in my house?**

You may suspect that you have mold if you see discolored patches, cottony or speckled growth on walls or furniture or if you smell an earthy or musty odor. Evidence of past or ongoing water damage should also trigger more thorough inspection. You may find mold growth underneath water-damaged surfaces or behind walls, floors or ceilings.

#### **Should I test my home for mold?**

The DuPage County Health Department does not recommend testing as a first step to determine if you have a mold problem. Reliable air sampling for mold

can be expensive and requires expertise and equipment that is not available to the general public. Owners of individual private homes and apartments generally will need to pay a contractor to carry out such sampling, because insurance companies and public health agencies seldom provide this service.

Another reason the health department does not recommend testing for mold contamination is that there are few available standards for judging what is an acceptable quantity of mold. In all locations, there is some level of airborne mold outdoors. If sampling is carried out in a home, an outdoor air sample also must be collected at the same time as the indoor samples, to provide a baseline measurement. Because individual susceptibility varies so greatly, sampling is at best a general guide. The simplest way to deal with a suspicion of mold contamination is: **If you can see or smell mold, you likely have a problem and should take the steps outlined below.** Mold growth is likely to recur unless the source of moisture that is allowing mold to grow is removed and the contaminated area is cleaned.

### **GENERAL CLEAN-UP PROCEDURES**

The following is intended as an overview for homeowners or apartment dwellers. We recommend that you consult EPA and other documents listed in the useful publications section.

#### **Elements of the Clean-up Procedures**

- Identify and eliminate sources of moisture.
- Identify and assess the magnitude and area of mold contamination.
- Clean and dry moldy.
- Bag and dispose of all material that may have moldy residues, such as rags, paper, leaves, and debris.

#### **Assessing the Size of a Mold Contamination Problem**

There will be a significant difference in the approach used for a small mold problem – total area affected is less than 10 square feet – and a large contamination problem – more than 100 square feet. In the case of a relatively small area, the homeowner or maintenance staff, using personal protective equipment, can handle the clean-up. However, for cases of large areas, it is advisable that an experienced, professional contractor be used.

The type of contractor needed for each case will depend on the size and scope of the project. The DuPage County Health Department does not accredit, certify, recommend or endorse any contractors.

## **Can mold cleaning-up activities be hazardous to my health?**

Yes. During the cleaning process, you may be exposed to mold, strong detergents, and disinfectants. Spore counts may be 10 to 1000 times higher than background levels when mold-contaminated materials are disturbed. Take steps to protect your and your family's health during cleanup:

- When handling or cleaning moldy materials, it is important to use a respirator to protect yourself from inhaling airborne spores.
- Use rubber gloves.
- Try cleaning a test area first. If you feel that this activity adversely affected your health, you should consider paying a licensed contractor or other experienced professional to carry out the work.
- Ask family members or bystanders to leave areas that are being cleaned.
- Air out your house well during and after the work.

## **Removal of Moldy Materials**

Clean up should begin after the moisture source is fixed and excess water has been removed. Wear gloves when handling moldy materials.

- Discard porous materials, such as ceiling tiles, sheetrock, carpeting, and wood products.
- Bag and discard moldy items; if properly enclosed, items can be disposed with household trash.
- Dry affected areas for 2 or 3 days.

Because spores are more easily released when moldy materials dry out, it is advisable to remove moldy items as soon as possible. If there was flooding, drywall should be removed to a level above the high-water mark. Visually inspect the wall interior and remove any mold-contaminated materials.

## **Clean-up**

When attempting to clean less porous items, the first step is to remove as much mold as possible. A

cleaning detergent is effective for this purpose. Wear gloves, mask and eye protection when doing this cleanup.

- Use soap, detergent, or a commercial cleaner, in hot water, and scrub the area that is affected by the mold.
- Use a stiff brush or cleaning pad on cement-block walls or other uneven surfaces.
- Rinse cleaned items with water and dry thoroughly.

## **Disinfection of Contaminated Materials**

Disinfecting agents can be toxic for humans, not just molds. They should be used only when necessary and should be handled with caution. Disinfectants are intended to be applied to thoroughly cleaned materials and are used to ensure most microorganisms have been killed. Removal of mold growth from nonporous materials usually is sufficient. Wear gloves, mask and eye protection when using disinfectants

- After thoroughly cleaning and rinsing contaminated materials, a solution of 10 percent household bleach can be used as a disinfectant.
- Keep the disinfectant on the treated material for the prescribed time before rinsing or drying, typically 10 minutes is recommended for a bleach solution.
- Bleach fumes can irritate the eyes, nose, and throat. Make sure working areas are well ventilated.

## **Who can I contact for more information?**

Should you need additional information on mold, please contact the DuPage County Health Department at (630) 682-7400. [www.dupagehealth.org](http://www.dupagehealth.org).

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This document was modeled after the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment / *Mold Information Sheet*, August 2002.