

SICK BUILDINGS / A SPECIAL REPORT

A mold primer

Tips for protecting yourself and your family

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How can I tell I have a mold problem?

- ▶ Look for visible mold growth, and sniff for an earthy or musty smell.
- ▶ Look for signs of water damage behind and underneath carpets and pads, sink cabinets and similar places.
- ▶ Mold often occurs after flooding or a plumbing leak. If a severe event occurs, call your insurance agent immediately.
- ▶ Renters should contact building owners or a manager about water problems. If persistent water problems aren't addressed, you may want to contact the county or state health departments.
- ▶ Let your symptoms be your guide. If you have a moldy or musty smell in your basement but no one is sick, don't be too worried about it.

Can I tackle the cleanup myself?

The size of the mold growth is the yardstick. The Environmental Protection Agency says if each area is less than 10 square feet, you can do the job yourself. If it's larger, or if you suspect the mold is hidden, consider hiring a professional. If you use a contractor, check references. Ask if they have insurance to cover their work. Get estimates. And ask the contractor to follow recommendations from the EPA's Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings, or other professional guidelines.

Should I test the mold?

Testing or sampling for mold often isn't necessary, the EPA says. No matter what type of mold is found, you still have to eliminate it. All substantial indoor mold growth is potentially harmful and should be removed promptly.

Cleanup and removal guidelines

- ▶ Wear long rubber gloves and goggles, and outer clothing (long sleeves and long pants) that can be easily laundered or discarded. Use a dust mask such as a N-95 respirator, available at hardware stores.
- ▶ On nonporous materials, scrub with a stiff brush, detergent and water. Dry completely.
- ▶ On drywall, use a damp rag with baking soda or a bit of detergent. Don't let drywall get too wet.

- ▶ The EPA doesn't recommend use of a chemical or biocide as a routine practice. If you decide to use one, ventilate the area and exhaust the air to the outdoors.
- ▶ If you want to disinfect, mix one-quarter to one cup of bleach per gallon of water. Use proper ventilation.
- ▶ Absorbent materials such as ceiling tiles and carpet may have to be discarded if they are growing mold. Dispose of moldy materials in plastic. Dead mold may cause allergic reactions in some people, so it must be removed.
- ▶ Don't paint or caulk moldy surfaces. Clean up the mold and dry the surfaces before painting.

Beware of fraud

Some organizations certify mold remediators, but there's no state regulation of such firms in Georgia or many other states.

Connie Mason suggests getting more than one evaluation. She did so after a local repair firm gave her an initial estimate of \$10,000 to remove mold in her Ormewood Park house. Mason's roommate, who has lupus, an autoimmune disease, had been told by her allergy doctor to get the home tested for mold.

"I believed the guy [who gave the estimate]," Mason says. "We were so shocked. We were ready to give him a check."

Mason, who works in the real estate advertising department at the Journal-Constitution, got three more estimates. The verdict: There was minimal mold in the crawl space but no unusual growth inside the home.

There was a roof leak she needed to fix, which her insurance policy covered.

Mason recommends using an inspector, not a mold repair firm, to judge whether there's a mold problem in your home.

Some resources on the Web

- [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [California Department of Health Services](#)
- [California Air Resources Board](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Health](#)
- [Texas Department of Health](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health](#)
- [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#)
- [Healthy Schools Network](#)

AT HOME

What to look for that can cause air quality problems at home:

- ▶ 1. Tobacco smoke.
- ▶ 2. Unvented gas appliances, such as kerosene space heaters.
- ▶ 3. Dirty, wet or moldy carpet or flooring.
- ▶ 4. Mold in basement, attic or living space. Musty odors.
- ▶ 5. Objectionable chemical odors.
- ▶ 6. Large buildup of dust or dirt.
- ▶ 7. Continual respiratory or other symptoms.
- ▶ 8. Heavy use of pesticides indoors.
- ▶ 9. Dryer not vented to the outside.
- ▶ 10. Exhaust fan in bathrooms and cooking areas not vented to the outside.

What to do if you have a serious or chronic problem:

- ▶ 1. Check with your insurance company for options and coverage on water damage.
- ▶ 2. Call the EPA's Indoor Air Quality Clearinghouse, 1-800-438-4318.
- ▶ 3. Call the local health department.
- ▶ 4. Consult a doctor about your symptoms. Explain your concerns about possible environmental causes.
- ▶ 5. Clean up any mold, or hire a professional.
- ▶ 6. Properly vent appliances and exhaust fans.
- ▶ 7. Consult your pest control company about methods that limit the use of pesticides.

AT WORK

What to look for if you suspect air quality problems in your workplace:

- ▶ 1. Signs of water intrusion and leaks.
- ▶ 2. Mold growth in ceiling tiles, carpets or elsewhere.
- ▶ 3. Objectionable odors, including those from office machines or furniture, or sewage smells.
- ▶ 4. High humidity.
- ▶ 5. Heavy accumulation of dirt or dust.
- ▶ 6. Ventilation system that is not maintained.
- ▶ 7. Evidence of secondhand smoke, from either within the building or outside.
- ▶ 8. Odors from nearby offices or businesses.
- ▶ 9. Smell of automobile exhaust inside building.
- ▶ 10. An unusual number of health complaints, including repeated respiratory problems and burning eyes. And whether symptoms clear up when you're on vacation, then recur when you return to the office.

What to do if you have a serious or chronic problem:

- ▶ 1. Talk to a supervisor, or address the problem in writing.
- ▶ 2. Ask for maintenance records for the heating, ventilating and air conditioning system, to determine if it is clean, dry and running properly. Ask if filtration system can be upgraded.
- ▶ 3. Call state or local public health department, to see if it offers assistance on indoor air quality.
- ▶ 4. Call the Occupational Safety and Health Administration: 770-984-8700 or 770-493-6644.
- ▶ 5. Call the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health: 1-800-356-4674.

AT SCHOOL

What to look for if you think your child's school has air quality problems:

- ▶ 1. Signs of water intrusion or leaks.
- ▶ 2. Mold growth on carpets, ceiling tiles or elsewhere.
- ▶ 3. A lot of dirt or dust.
- ▶ 4. Objectionable odors, such as cleaners, adhesives, pesticides or sewage.
- ▶ 5. Stuffy air in classrooms; lack of air flow.
- ▶ 6. High humidity.
- ▶ 7. School bus exhaust odors in classrooms or halls.

- ▶8. Temperature extremes: too hot in warm months, too cold in winter.
- ▶9. Many children out with respiratory problems. Or children whose symptoms improve during extended vacations, then recur after they return.

What to do if you have a serious or chronic problem:

- ▶1. Talk to the principal about investigating and cleanup.
- ▶2. If your concerns aren't addressed, you may want to contact the school board.
- ▶3. Recommend that your school adopt the Environmental Protection Agency's Tools for Schools program.
- ▶4. If you're still not getting anywhere, your options include contacting public health officials, politicians and code-enforcement officials.

Source: Staff research