

WISCONSIN REALTORS ASSOCIATION

LIVING WITH MOLD

BY RICK STAFF

Every home in Wisconsin contains mold. It can be found both inside the home and in the air outside the home. As the “mold counts” provided by the media during allergy season indicate, mold is naturally present in the environment.

Recent media attention and large damage awards in recent lawsuits have raised the public’s awareness of the health issues that can be related mold exposure. High levels of mold in homes can produce allergic reactions and some molds produce toxins which can cause illness to occupants. Homeowners and homebuyers often need guidance to address mold issues when they arise in their property or in a real estate transaction. Despite the growing awareness of the mold issue it remains a subject where there is some basic information available but few science-based facts to offer. The only thing that is certain about the health effects of mold is that nothing is certain.

WHY DOES MOLD GROW IN HOMES?

Combine the mold naturally occurring in a home with moisture and a food source, and the amount of mold is likely to increase. The moisture can come from flooding, leaking pipes, or high humidity levels in the home. Food sources can range from paper to soap film but any moist cellulose based product (paper, particle board, wood, fabric) will serve as an ideal home for mold growth.

PREVENTION

Because you will never remove all mold or potential food sources for mold from your home, the key to mold prevention is maintenance and other actions to control excess moisture. Older homes usually have enough inside/outside air exchange to limit moisture levels. A basement dehumidifier may be necessary in the summer, but mold usually isn’t a health issue if leaky pipes, roofs, and basements have been avoided.

On the other hand, modern construction techniques may limit air exchange to the point that moisture control becomes critical. Cooking, showers, watering plants, and damp basements can contribute to the moisture levels in the house and increase the likelihood of unhealthy levels of mold. Controlling moisture with ventilation, exhaust fans, dehumidifiers, and other humidity controls may be all that is necessary until the flood.

RESPONSE TO FLOODING

Whether a bursting pipe or a leaky roof or basement causes the flood, an immediate response is required to prevent mold buildup. Water damage that is not addressed within 24 to 72 hours may stimulate the growth of mold.

A visual inspection is the most important step in identifying possible mold contamination. The inspection should include



any areas damaged by water -- behind cabinets, in attics, under carpets, inside wall cavities and in any other area where porous material or soft goods have been exposed to high humidity (over 60 per cent) or water for more than 72 hours.

Any water-damaged sheetrock may need to be removed up to at least a foot above the high-water mark. This will also allow the wall cavities to drain and dry properly. Wet insulation, in the ceiling or walls, should be removed and replaced or it may become a breeding ground for mold. Damp or wet carpets, pads and other similar items also can become a medium for potentially dangerous mold growth. Depending on the length of time from the initial water damage, the amount of water involved, the cleanliness of the water and the type of materials affected, it may be necessary to remove carpets, pads and any other wet items (especially clothing and other soft goods) from the premises for proper drying, cleaning and treatment.

RESPONSE TO MOLD

The general rule of thumb is very simple: If you can see mold or smell mold you should remove it. Removal may be accomplished by cleaning (e.g. wash with bleach and water) or by removal of the materials on which the mold is growing. Unfortunately it can be difficult to determine what the appropriate actions are without some testing or consultation with a mold remediation specialist. Obviously cleaning up the mold growing on the bathroom tiles is a do-it-yourself job. However, black mold growing on cellulose-based materials may or may not be toxic mold. While the odds do not favor the mold being toxic, in the worst case scenario a homeowner removing materials covered with toxic mold may threaten the health of his or her family if toxic spores are released into the home during removal.

Proper removal of the mold-contaminated material is only the first step when the mold is toxic. A certified mold remediation specialist will follow the removal with the decontamination of the structure and furnishings affected. Property owners need to treat every mold situation individually and make clean-up decisions responsibly. The EPA, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services and your local health department all have helpful information to get you on the right course. Contact your local health department at _____

Additional resources about mold are provided below.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT MOLD

Environmental Protection Agency:

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/moldresources.html#Homes%20and%20Molds>

Centers for Disease Control:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/asthma/factsheets/molds/default.htm>

Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services – Flood Aftermath Procedures:

http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/dph_emsip/InjuryPrevention/disaster/flooding.htm

CLEAN UP AND PREVENTION RESOURCES, New York City Department of Health,
Bureau of Environmental & Occupational Disease Epidemiology -- **Guidelines on
Assessment and Remediation of Fungi in Indoor Environments:**

<http://nycdoitt.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/doh/html/epi/moldrpt1.html>

How A House Works • Combating Mold & Mildew, *Family Handyman*, March 2000 -
An article about what mold and mildew are, how they affect the health of you and your
house and, finally, how you can prevent their growth and get rid of the stuff.

www.familyhandyman.com/200003/how_a_house_works/main.html