

# I Think I Have Mold in My Home, Should I Be Concerned?

This fact sheet provides homeowners and tenants with helpful tips and standard practices for identifying mold, assessing whether mold could pose a health concern, cleaning up mold, and preventing mold.

## What is mold?

### MAIN POINTS:

- Without water, mold cannot survive.
- All molds are potential health hazards and should be removed.
- Sampling for mold is expensive and usually unnecessary. If you see it, remove it.
- Guidelines for cleanup and removal are provided on page 4.

Molds are microscopic organisms that are found virtually everywhere, both indoors and outdoors. Molds are types of fungi that live on plants, foods, dry leaves, wood, and other organic materials. Mold spores are tiny structures that are the reproductive part of the microorganism. A group of mold spores can be seen by the naked eye. The spores often look velvety or powdery, and appear in colors like pale white, yellow, orange, green, dark brown, or black. The spores are very tiny and light-weight, allowing them to float in the air. Sometimes some mold spores can cause symptoms similar to those caused by plant pollen or other allergens.

Mold needs three things to grow:

1. A wet or damp environment;
2. A food source such as leaves, wood, paper products, wall board, insulation materials, ceiling tiles, and other organic based materials; and
3. A temperature similar to what humans live with.



Mold on a Ceiling

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

**Yes**, but only when it is present in large amounts. It is important to note that some mold is present in every home and does not pose a health hazard when not growing on water-damaged material. When mold spores are present in large amounts, they may cause allergic reactions, including sneezing, coughing, runny nose, burning eyes, and skin rash. Mold exposure can also trigger asthma episodes. It is important to remove mold from hard, nonporous surfaces, and to discard porous items that are contaminated with mold. Even dead spores can cause allergic reactions or other respiratory problems. Mold itself can also cause structural damage to your home.

## Can mold become a problem in my home?

**Yes.** Mold needs moisture to thrive and multiply. Major sources of indoor moisture that can cause mold problems include:

- flooding
- backed-up sewers
- plumbing leaks
- leaky roofs
- humidifiers
- ice dams
- damp basements
- moisture from combustion appliances (furnace or stove)
- excess moisture in kitchens and bathrooms due to poor or no ventilation

## How am I exposed to indoor molds?

Mold is found everywhere, both outdoors and indoors. It is common to find mold spores in the air in Connecticut homes. Mold spores primarily cause health problems when they become airborne and are inhaled. Exposure can also occur through skin contact, and eating moldy foods, although the health risks are expected to be minimal with both ingestion and skin contact.

## What are possible health effects?

Typical symptoms (alone or in combination) reported by individuals exposed to mold include:

- wheezing, breathing difficulties
- asthma attacks
- dizziness
- dry, hacking cough
- sore throat
- headaches
- watery, burning, reddened eyes
- nasal and sinus congestion
- shortness of breath
- skin irritation

**Note:** These symptoms are not specific to mold exposure and can also be caused by other conditions such as colds or other allergies. See your physician to identify the cause of any symptoms you may be experiencing.

## How much mold does it take to make me sick?

It depends. For some individuals a few mold spores can cause health problems. For most individuals, it may take much more. If you have health effects that you believe are related to mold, you should consult with your physician and take steps to eliminate the excess moisture and remove the mold (see Cleanup and Removal section on page 4).

## Who is at increased risk when exposed to mold?

Exposure to large amounts of mold inside buildings is not healthy for anyone. It is important to quickly identify and correct any moisture sources before mold levels increase and create possible health problems. Visible mold should be cleaned up as soon as possible.

The following groups of individuals appear to be at higher risk for ill health effects due to mold exposure:

- infants and children
- elderly
- immune compromised individuals (those with HIV infection, cancer, autoimmune disease, liver disease, anyone receiving chemotherapy)
- individuals with existing respiratory conditions or sensitivities such as allergies and asthma

## Are some molds more hazardous than others?

Some of the natural byproducts of mold metabolism are chemicals that can cause irritation or allergic reaction. Certain types of molds can produce mycotoxins which are chemicals that are toxic to humans, animals, and plants. Most of what we know is about mycotoxin exposure from eating contaminated foods. Very little is known about inhaling mycotoxins. Health effects in humans from mold vary with an individual's health status, the specific mold by-product, the amount of exposure, and the route of exposure. However, in most instances it is far more important to remove mold and eliminate moisture sources than to spend time and resources identifying and counting what type of mold is present.

### ***What about Stachybotrys?***

One mold, *Stachybotrys chartarum* (SC), sometimes referred to as “black mold” has received media attention. SC is a dark greenish-black, oily-looking mold that grows on materials with high cellulose content (sheetrock, wood, etc.) that are constantly soaked with water. SC does not grow on materials usually found in bathrooms. SC needs a lot of water to survive and is a relatively uncommon mold. SC is capable of producing a mycotoxin and was once suspected of causing health effects more serious than irritation in the very young. However, it has not been proven that SC causes these other health effects.

## Should I test my home for mold?

The Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) **does not recommend testing as the first step** to determine if you have a mold problem. There are no health-based air standards for levels of mold indoors. Air testing almost never affects the final recommendations. If you can see or smell mold or mildew, you have a moisture and mold problem. The first step is to control the moisture and then clean and dry out the moldy area. Throw out any porous materials that are moldy. Then it is important to identify the moisture source and correct it.

Be aware that sampling is expensive. On rare occasions, sampling may be useful to help locate sources behind walls or in other inaccessible locations and/or to assess clean up efficacy. This usually requires hiring a professional because mold assessments require sampling equipment not available to the general public and “do-it-yourself” mold kits are not recommended.

If testing is performed, outdoor mold samples should always be collected at the same sampling time as indoor samples to compare the two. It is critical for the lab to identify the species of mold in the samples as well as to provide numerical counts. Numbers alone are not useful.

If you are a tenant in a rental home or apartment, speak with your landlord about mold and moisture problems. If the problem is serious, you may want to contact your local health department.

## **Cleanup and Removal of Mold**

*Should I clean my home or hire a professional?*

One of the first decisions is whether to hire a professional to clean or do it yourself. If the job is too large or you are allergic to mold spores or feel your health has been affected, consider using a professional. DPH's fact sheet [Mold Assessment and Clean-Up: Helpful Tips for Homeowners and Tenants](#) provides information about hiring a professional to conduct mold assessment and clean-up.

*How do I clean mold in my home?*

- Identify and remove the source of moisture. This could include improving ventilation, using a basement dehumidifier during humid months, repairing roof leaks, and/or fixing plumbing leaks. After the moisture source has been corrected, begin the cleanup and drying out process. You can purchase a hygrometer from your local hardware store. This instrument measures the humidity level. Be sure to keep the humidity level below 60%.
- Mold-contaminated materials that cannot be dried out and thoroughly cleaned should be discarded. This may include ceiling tiles, sheetrock, plaster, wood products, and carpets. If there has been flood damage, replace all sheetrock and insulation damaged by water up to at least 12 inches above the high water mark. When handling moldy materials, it is suggested that you wear rubber gloves and a properly fitting N-95 mask (not a dust mask) to protect you from breathing airborne spores.
- Clean mold on hard, non-porous materials such as plastic, glass, and metal. Soap and water is very effective at cleaning mold and is the preferred method. A mild solution of bleach (no more than one cup per gallon of water) is also effective. Always use bleach in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Bleach can irritate your eyes, nose, and throat. Ventilate the area well, and wear rubber gloves and eye protection. Remember, never mix bleach with ammonia; the vapors are toxic!

*What can I save? What should I toss?*

Use your best judgement. If the material absorbs water, it is considered porous. Porous materials should be thrown out. Materials such as hard plastic, glass, and metal are non-porous and can be cleaned.

For more information, contact:

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