FACT SHEET

Environmental Health & Prevention Services

Health Risks of Mould

What is mould and where is it found?

Moulds are members 'of the fungus family. They are present everywhere - indoors and outdoors. They serve an important role by helping to break down organic matter. There are more than 100,000 species of mould. Moulds grow tiny seeds called "spores" that will float in the air like dust. Spores can not be seen, but they can be breathed in. Mould is most likely to grow where there is water or dampness, such as in bathrooms and basements.

How can moulds affect my health?

The most common types of mould are generally not hazardous to healthy individuals. However, adverse health effects will develop in certain people when they have been breathing the indoor air for a period of time in a mould-contaminated building. Breathing fresh air from the outside will reduce or eliminate these effects.

What are the health effects?

People who have asthma, hay fever, or other allergies are more likely to react to mould. They can get runny noses, eye irritations, coughs, congestion, and asthma attacks. People who have weakened immune systems may be susceptible to mould infections from breathing mould spores in the air. With long term exposure to certain moulds, even healthy people can develop respiratory and flu-like symptoms, headaches, skin problems, and impaired immune functions. Second hand smoke makes mould-related health effects worse .

What is Stachybotrys?

Stachybotrys is one type of mould that may cause adverse health effects. Stachybotrys is a black mould that grows well on materials with high cellulose content (such as drywall, ceiling tiles, jute-backed carpets, etc.) that become chronically moist or water-damaged due to water leaks, flooding, excessive humidity, or condensation. Stachybotrys spores do not become easily airborne; therefore, contamination of indoor air by this kind of mould is unusual.

How can I look for Stachybotrys in my home?

Many moulds are black in appearance but are not Stachybotrys (e.g. the black mould generally found on bathroom surfaces). Stachybotrys is generally brought into a building along with outside water during a water leak or a flood. Once inside, Stachybotrys will grow on damp materials', but will generally remain confined to areas near a source of water. Removing any sources of moisture, such as through repairs or dehumidification, is critical to preventing its growth.

Who is at risk?

Infants under one year old are most at risk if they breathe high levels of Stachybotrys spores for long periods of time. Stachybotrys has been linked to a very rare condition called "pulmonary hemosiderosis" (bleeding of the lungs) in infants from extremely contaminated dwellings. This condition can only occur in the developing lungs of infants, and it does not occur in anyone else. However, other people may develop more general health effects, like

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More

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eye irritations, asthma aggravation, cold-like symptoms, rashes, headaches, fatigue, or an inability to concentrate.

What can I do if mould is present where I live?

Although any visible mould can be tested by an environmental consultant or analyzed by a lab specializing in microbiology, these tests can be very expensive. There is no simple and cheap way to sample the air in your home to find out what kinds of moulds are present, and if they are airborne. The most important thing is to eliminate the mould. To do this, correct underlying water entry or moisture problems, remove all mouldy materials, and clean the affected area.

How can mould be cleaned up?

The source of any water problem, such as roof or plumbing leaks, or flooding problems, must be fixed. If these problems are not fixed, the mould will return after it is cleaned. Mould contaminated absorbent building materials should be removed, discarded in a sealed plastic bag, and replaced. It is the responsibility of a building owner to carry out any structural repairs, modifications, or removal of building materials to solve a mould problem. **If** mould is widespread, consult with professionals about a more extensive clean up (air ducts, personal items, furniture, etc.).

On hard surfaces, mould should be cleaned by residents as soon as it appears. Persons cleaning mould should be free of symptoms and allergies, and should wear masks and rubber gloves. Make sure all mouldy areas are well ventilated with fresh outside air. To clean, wet the mouldy surface with undiluted household bleach so that it stays moist for at least 15 minutes. Then mix one part **household bleach to two parts water, add a little bit of dishwashing detergent to cut any dirt and oil, and scrub the surface. Do not add ammonia or ammonia products because it makes dangerous vapours.**

What if I experience symptoms?

If you believe that you or your children have symptoms, especially unexplained nose or mouth bleeding in infants, see your doctor. Let your physician know about your suspicions - many symptoms associated with mould exposure can have many other causes. Ventilate your living space with lots of fresh outdoor air and avoid smoking inside. Attempt to track down and solve the problem.

For more information contact Community Health Services Department, Environmental Health and Prevention Services at 519 383-8331 or 1-800-667-1839.