

TOXIC MOLD

How To Deal Effectively With A Menace To Healthy Homes

Nationwide, toxic mold is a growing concern for home sellers, buyers, real estate agents and insurance companies. It has become a headline issue in the past few years for several reasons. Modern energy-efficient buildings are so tightly sealed that poor air circulation can create a friendly environment for mold, as can moisture problems in older homes not sealed tightly enough. Toxic mold found in homes has been proven to cause a variety of illnesses in otherwise healthy people. Litigation on the issue has increased with many courts awarding affected homeowners millions of dollars in damages from insurance companies. Insurance companies have reacted by eliminating or limiting homeowners policy coverage for mold-related damage.

The Good, The Bad, The Ugly

Nearly every home has some form of mold. Although most household molds are usually harmless from a health standpoint, even the common ones can cause allergic reactions in some people. Toxic molds, such as penicillium, stachybotrys, cladosporium, aspergillus and black mold, are a real health concern for humans who experience prolonged exposure to them.

In addition, homeowners should be aware that molds harmless to humans can be harmful to a home. Left unchecked, mold growths can damage a home's structure and become a costly clean-up problem.

Making Mold At Home

Just two conditions are necessary for healthy mold growth:

1. **Moisture** — which could come from a leaky roof, defective plumbing, bad drainage or high-humidity in areas such as a laundry room or bathroom;
2. **A food source** — such as wood, paper, fabric, leather, gypsum, fiberboard, drywall, stucco, and many

insulation fibrous materials. Mold can even grow on glass, tile and stainless steel, but in such cases it is usually feeding on something attached to the surface of these materials — oil, film, dirt, skin cells, and so on.

Tell-Tale Signs

How do you know if a home already has a mold problem? Look for the following indicators:

- Stains on ceilings or walls.
- A musty, earthy or mildewy odor.
- A speckled pattern (black, brown, orange, pink,

green) on or behind walls, floors, tile, grout, plumbing, air ducts or other surfaces.

- Swollen or crumbling walls or buckling floor boards.
- Mild to severe unexplained illness in combination with the tell-tale signs listed here.

Testing And Removal

Mold you can see doesn't really need to be tested; it needs to be removed — quickly and thoroughly. If you find a small amount of mold in your home (say, less than a 10-square-foot patch), the Environmental Protection Agency suggests you may be able to clean up the problem yourself.

For mold on hard surfaces, scrub the area with detergent and water, then allow it to dry completely. Bleach will also kill mold, however, it should only be used in well-ventilated rooms on non-porous surfaces that are not susceptible to stains. When mold is growing on absorbent or porous materials, there isn't much you can do except throw the material away. Even if you are able to kill the mold, the dead spores can cause allergic reactions.

Testing is certainly a good idea after an area has been cleaned and dried to ensure that all the mold was removed. Testing may also be necessary if you have had recent water damage or you suspect an unexplained illness may be the result of exposure to mold. Call in professionals with credentials that demonstrate they know what they are doing.

For mold in larger areas, on valuables or in hard-to-reach places (such as air ducts or behind walls), you'll need to call in treatment professionals. Make certain the contractor is experienced at cleaning up mold and check the contractor's references and professional affiliations. A poorly done job could waste your money and spread mold throughout your home — exacerbating the problem. The contractor's sampling analysis should follow methods

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