



## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

# What is Mold?

"Mold" describes a wide range of fungi found nearly everywhere indoors and outdoors. Mold can grow on plants, foods, dry leaves, and in soil. When mold grows outdoors, it can help break down organic material. However, when mold grows indoors, it can cause health problems when inhaled in large amounts. Mold only needs a few simple things to grow:

- ✓ Suitable place to grow (mold prefers warm, dark, unventilated places)
- ✓ Food sources (i.e. plants/soil, compost, wood, drywall, wallpaper, carpet, insulation, ceiling tiles)
- ✓ Moisture (most important - controlling excess moisture in your home is the key to preventing and stopping indoor mold growth)

The most common types of mold are usually not harmful to healthy people. Those who are more at risk from mold exposure include pregnant women, infants/children, elders, and people with asthma, allergies, or a weakened immune system. Some types of mold can cause more serious health problems, but this is usually rare. It is important to remember that all visible indoor mold growth may be harmful to health and should be removed. ***If you have health concerns, please consult with your health care professional.***

Symptoms of mold exposure may include:

- ✓ Nasal and sinus congestion
- ✓ Respiratory problems such as wheezing, shortness of breath, or other breathing difficulties
- ✓ Cough and/or sore throat
- ✓ Skin and eye irritation (i.e. red, watery, blurry vision, light sensitivity)
- ✓ Upper respiratory infection (including sinus)
- ✓ Central nervous system problems (constant headaches, memory problems, mood changes)

### "Black Mold"

*Stachybotrys chartarum/Stachybotrys atra* or "Black Mold" is a greenish-black mold that grows on material with high cellulose and low nitrogen content (i.e. wood, paper, and cotton products, dust, and lint). This mold is not common, but growth can occur when there is moisture from water damage, excess humidity, water leaks, condensation, or flooding. At very high levels, health effects such as cold-like symptoms, allergy symptoms, sinusitis and rashes may occur. *Stachybotrys* may be associated with other more dangerous health issues in infants. **Not all black mold is *Stachybotrys*.** For example, the black mold commonly found between bathroom tiles is not *Stachybotrys*. Keep in mind that a moldy home is an unhealthy home, so prevent all mold growth the best you can.

### Identifying a Mold Problem

- ✓ Mold often appears as discoloration, staining, or fuzzy growth, and it may be white, gray, brown, black, yellow, or green
- ✓ Look for water leaks, standing water, water stains, warped wood, cracked plaster, or condensation
- ✓ Mold growth may be hidden behind or underneath materials such as carpet/padding, wallpaper, vinyl flooring, sink cabinets, poorly constructed showers or tubs, furniture, or stored items

### Identify and Fix the Moisture Problem:

Maintain the home's relative humidity between 20%-40% in the winter and less than 60% the rest of the year. Control high humidity with ventilation and dehumidifiers. Sources of excess indoor moisture include:

- ✓ Flooding/overflow or leaks from tubs, sinks, or toilets
- ✓ Roof/plumbing leaks
- ✓ Humidifier use
- ✓ Line-drying laundry indoors/inadequate venting of clothes dryer exhaust to outdoors
- ✓ Firewood stored indoors
- ✓ Inadequate venting of kitchen and bathroom humidity
- ✓ Damp basement/crawl space
- ✓ House plants (overwatering them can cause large amounts of moisture)

# How to Clean and Remove Mold

## Take Steps to Protect Yourself:

If the moldy area is more than 10 square feet (3 ft. by 3 ft. patch), or if the water and/or mold damage was caused by sewage or other contaminated water, contact a professional service provider. Use protective equipment when handling or working around materials contaminated with mold. The following measures can help minimize exposure to mold during clean-up:

- ✓ Ask others to leave the areas being cleaned
- ✓ Ventilate your home both during and after the clean-up
- ✓ Wear rubber gloves, eye goggles, and protective clothing that can be easily cleaned or discarded
- ✓ Consider wearing a mask or respirator – located at hardware stores (particle removal called N-95)
- ✓ Enclose all moldy materials in plastic before carrying through the home/disposing
- ✓ Damp clean the entire work area to pick up any mold spores in settled dust

## Begin Drying All Wet Materials

As soon as possible, begin drying damp materials. If necessary, use fans and dehumidifiers. Move wet items away from walls and off floors. Ventilate the area thoroughly. Try to expose the area to sunlight.

## Remove and Dispose of Mold Contaminated Materials

Wet or damp porous materials that have mold growing on them or that smell moldy need to be removed from the home. This may include drywall, insulation, plaster, carpet and pad, ceiling tiles, wood products (other than solid wood), and paper products. These materials should be bagged and thrown away. Non-porous materials with surface mold growth can be saved if they are cleaned well and kept dry.

## Clean/Disinfect Surfaces

Surface mold growing on non-porous materials can usually be cleaned and disinfected.

- ✓ When **cleaning** the area, thoroughly scrub the contaminated surfaces using a stiff brush or cleaning pad, hot water, and a non-ammonia soap/detergent or commercial cleaner
- ✓ Collect excess cleaning liquid with a sponge, mop, or wet/dry vacuum
- ✓ Rinse entire area with clean water
- ✓ After cleaning, **disinfect** the cleaned area with a mix of ½ to 1 cup of bleach per gallon of water
- ✓ Collect excess bleach solution with a sponge, mop, or wet/dry vacuum
- ✓ DO NOT rinse or wipe dry – allow the areas to air dry thoroughly, and expose the affected area to plenty of sunlight

**CAUTION: Never mix bleach with ammonia or other cleaning products -- the fumes are toxic!**

## Mold Testing

Washtenaw County does not recommend testing for mold. Standards for mold levels have not been set. Testing is expensive, and it is difficult to say at what levels mold may cause health effects. Preventative action is best – whenever you can see mold or smell mold, assume there is a problem and fix it.

## Filing a Mold Complaint

If you are a renter and are would like to file a complaint about mold in your apartment or home, please talk to your landlord or apartment management company about the issue **first**. If the problem is not resolved in a reasonable amount of time, then contact our office at 734-222-3800 to file a complaint. Our role is to serve as a mediator or communicator between the complainant and the responsible party. We also provide information to both parties regarding environmental issues. **We will not come out to your home to inspect the mold, and we do not have equipment to test for mold.**

## For More Information:



Washtenaw County Department of Public Health - Environmental Health Division  
705 N. Zeeb Rd., P.O. Box 8645, Ann Arbor, MI 48107-8645  
(734) 222-3800  
[www.ewashtenaw.org](http://www.ewashtenaw.org)