



UPDATED: 08/2011

TROPICAL STORM/HURRICANE INFORMATION SHEET

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: CLEANING INDOOR MOLD

The Florida Department of Health has developed this list of Frequently Asked Questions to address some of the most common questions and concerns about cleaning indoor mold.

How can I tell if there is mold in my home?

Indoor mold growth can usually be seen or smelled.

Look for visible mold growth (it may look cottony, velvety, rough, or leathery and have different colors like white, gray, brown, black, yellow, or green). Mold often appears as a staining or fuzzy growth on furniture or building materials (walls, ceilings, or anything made of wood or paper). Look for signs of moisture or water damage (water leaks, standing water, water stains, condensation, etc.).

Check around air handling units (air conditioners, furnaces) for standing water. Routinely inspect the evaporator coils, liner surfaces, drain pans and drain lines. Search areas where you notice mold odors. If you can smell an earthy or musty odor, you may have a mold problem.

Who is most affected by mold?

The long-term presence of indoor mold may eventually become unhealthy for anyone. Those with special health concerns should consult a medical doctor if they feel their health is affected by indoor mold. The following types of people may be affected sooner and more severely than others:

- Babies and children
- Elderly persons
- Individuals with chronic respiratory conditions or allergies or asthma
- Persons having weakened immune systems (for example, people with HIV or AIDS, chemotherapy patients, or organ transplant recipients)

What health problems can be caused by mold?

There are four kinds of health problems that come from exposure to mold: allergic illness, irritant effects, infection, and toxic effects.

For people that are sensitive to molds, symptoms such as nasal and sinus irritation or congestion, dry hacking cough, wheezing, skin rashes or burning, watery or reddened eyes may occur. People with severe allergies to molds may have more serious reactions, such as hay-fever-like symptoms or shortness of breath. People with chronic illnesses or people with immune system problems may be more likely to get infections from certain molds, viruses and bacteria. Molds can also trigger asthma attacks in persons with asthma. Headaches, memory problems, mood swings, nosebleeds and body aches and pains are sometimes reported in mold complaints, but the causes of these physical symptoms are not yet understood. There is evidence of specific long-term toxic effects from eating foods with mold toxins. Unfortunately,

very little is known regarding the actual health risks from breathing in or skin contact with mold toxins. Allergic disease is now considered the most likely health problem related to mold exposures. Research into the possible health effects related to mold exposure continues today.

How Should Mold Be Cleaned?

Mold should be cleaned as soon as it appears. Persons who clean the mold should be free of symptoms and allergies. Small areas of mold should be cleaned using a detergent/soapy water or a commercial mildew or mold cleaner. Gloves and goggles should be worn during cleaning. The cleaned area should then be thoroughly dried. Throw away any sponges or rags used to clean mold.

If the mold returns quickly or spreads, it may mean you have an underlying problem, such as a water leak. Any water leaks must first be fixed when solving mold problems. If there is a lot of mold growth, consult the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's booklet, "Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings." It is available free by calling the EPA Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse at (800) 438-4318, or on the Internet at www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/mold_remediation.html. If the moldy material is not easily cleanable, such as drywall, carpet padding and insulation, then removal and replacement may be necessary.

Should bleach or other biocides (disinfectants, sanitizers, or fungicides) be used to kill mold?

Using bleach or other chemicals to kill indoor mold growth is not needed in most cases. The goal should be to remove mold growth by cleaning or removing moldy materials. Dead mold can still pose health risks if you are exposed. Using bleach or other disinfectants on surfaces after mold removal may be needed where people are thought to be susceptible to fungal infections (such as a person with immune system problems). Should you decide to use bleach or another chemical, please read and carefully follow the label directions and hazard statements (caution, warning, danger). Do not mix bleach with ammonia cleaners or acids, because a dangerous chlorine gas may be formed.

Should I use an ozone generator to address an existing mold problem?

No. Ozone irritates lungs, and is not likely to be effective at addressing an indoor mold problem. No one should expose themselves or others to ozone on purpose. Address the cause of the mold (usually moisture) and then remove the mold by cleaning surfaces or removing moldy materials.

Who should do the cleanup?

Who should do the cleanup depends on a number of factors. One consideration is the size of the mold problem. If the moldy area is less than about 10 square feet (less than roughly a 3 ft. by 3 ft. patch), in most cases, you can handle the job yourself. However, if there has been a lot of water damage, and/or mold growth covers more than 10 square feet, consult the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guideline, "Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings," on the web at http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/mold_remediation.html. Although written about schools and commercial buildings, this document also helps when dealing with mold in other building types.

If you choose to hire a contractor (or other professional service provider) to do the cleanup, make sure the contractor has experience cleaning up mold. Check references and ask the contractor to follow the recommendations in EPA's "Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings", the guidelines of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH), or other guidelines from professional or government organizations.

If you think the heating or air conditioning (HVAC) system may be contaminated with mold, read the EPA's guide "Should You Have the Air Ducts in Your Home Cleaned?" before taking further action. Visit www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/airduct.html, or call (800) 438-4318 for a free copy.

If you have concerns regarding your health before starting the cleanup, consult your doctor.

Note: The EPA suggests the following: "Do not run the HVAC system if you know or suspect that it is contaminated with mold - it could spread mold throughout the building". Unfortunately, it is thought that most, if not all, heating and air conditioning systems in Florida will support mold growth at some point. Stopping the use of an air conditioning system due to suspected mold growth would make most Florida buildings very uncomfortable during hot and humid weather. Should you turn off an air conditioner if a mold problem in the system is found? Ideally, yes. The system should be shut down while cleaning or mold removal is performed. If the water and/or mold damage was caused by sewage or other contaminated water, then call a professional who has experience cleaning and fixing buildings damaged by contaminated water.

Who can I call if I suspect that I have a mold problem, or if I want more information on mold?

For additional information about the health effects of mold exposure and information on the safe removal of mold, please call your County Health Department's Environmental Health Office, the Florida Department of Health, Radon and Indoor Toxics Program at 1-800-543-8279, or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse at 1-800-438-4318. If you have a mold complaint about an apartment or hotel, call the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation at 850-487-1395.

What is the Florida Department of Health doing about mold?

The Florida Department of Health Indoor Air program helps with mold issues through the following activities:

- Providing technical assistance and advice to the public, County Health Departments, School Districts and others
- Distributing current information and other resources on mold and moisture control

Please note:

- The Florida Department of Health does not provide mold testing
- The Florida Department of Health does not provide support to professional consultants

What can the County Health Departments Do?

County Health Department staff should be able to:

- Help you with the identification of mold problems and advise you on investigation techniques and clean-up methods

- Answer your questions about health effects and possible hazards of mold exposure
- Provide mold prevention advice into public message and disaster response plans
- Direct concerned people to the appropriate local resources or to the Florida Department of Health Indoor Air Program staff

Where can I obtain additional information on the Internet?

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<http://www.cdc.gov/mold/default.htm>

Florida Cooperative Extension, University of Florida

http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/TOPIC_Moisture_Mold_and_Mildew

For more information, please contact:

Florida Department of Health
Division of Environmental Health
Bureau of Community Environmental Health, Radon and Indoor Toxics
4052 Bald Cypress Way, Bin A08
Tallahassee, FL 32311

1-850-245-4288 or Toll-free 1-800-543-8279

<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/community/indoor-air/mold.htm>