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## TOXIC FUNGUS STILL AMONG US FLOOD LEFT 'BLACK MOLD' IN ITS WAKE

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Page: 1A

By Sue Ellyn Scaletta, Herald Staff Writer

Can you say stachybotrys chartarum?

Maybe not -- but you could be living with it. And it could be making you sick. Stachybotrys chartarum is the \$5 term for that "black mold" you may have heard about shortly after the 1997 flood.

"It's a fairly common soil fungus and apparently very common in the Red River Valley," Dr. Berlin Nelson told medical students at UND Monday. "When the river overflowed its banks, it brought with it all the sediment with the fungus in it."

Nelson is a professor of plant pathology at North Dakota State University.

"Stachybotrys chartarum . . . produces toxins . . . which are known to be very toxic to animal cells," he said. "The most commonly formed are termed satrotoxins."

He described several compounds produced by the fungus, including some which suppress the immune system.

"Due to all these compounds, contact with or inhalation of the fungus should be avoided," Nelson said.

Stachybotrys does not become airborne as easily as other molds, but it can get into the air, he said. And when it does, it can cause serious respiratory reactions, particularly in people with asthma or serious allergies.

Symptoms attributed to stachybotrys spores include headaches, sore throats, fatigue, recurring colds and bloody noses. In Grand Forks, it apparently found a purchase, took hold and spread quickly in some places.

"The water had only been out of there for a week to 10 days (when the fungus first was found)," Nelson said. "The water was very cold, and that should inhibit the growth. But the mold had already spread."

The mold thrives in cellulose and lives in fibrous materials such as carpet,

drywall and wallpaper.

When a Grand Forks man suffered serious respiratory failure after re-entering his home shortly after the flood, public health director Don Shields contacted the national Centers for Disease Control.

A CDC team that included Nelson inspected several buildings and found molds, including stachybotrys, in several locations. Among them were Central and Red River high schools, Lake Agassiz, Viking and Kelly elementary schools and several homes.

In two cases, it was growing on the back of drywall behind showers. Showing slides of how the black, slimy substance looks, Nelson explained Monday how the mold favors damp spots.

Materials that got wet in the flood and were not removed provide a choice breeding ground for stachybotrys and other molds, he said.

#### World traveler

Stachybotrys first was identified in Ukraine in the 1930s, when hundreds of horses sickened and died from eating hay on which the mold was found growing, Nelson said. The horses suffered inflamed lesions of the mouth, high temperatures, nervous disorders and necrosis of internal tissues.

But it wasn't until 1985 when a family in a Chicago suburb suffered repeatedly from similar symptoms -- including headaches, sore throats, hair loss and nausea -- from the mold.

An inspection of their home found stachybotrys inside the duct work and ceiling tiles.

In 1993-94 in Cleveland, 10 infants were diagnosed with pulmonary bleeding. Their homes were found to have high concentrations of stachybotrys.

"It has now been identified in 34 infants," Nelson said. "The one common factor was the presence of stachybotrys."

Since then, the fungus has been found in numerous "sick buildings," in which groups of workers suffered the same symptoms.

Skin contact with the fungus can cause a rash similar to eczema, he said.

"We don't want to panic about this," Nelson stressed. "We live all the time with molds and we don't really think this is a terrible problem."

But, he added, "we do know that these are very toxic compounds. We don't want to be inhaling them or touching them."

The fungus is difficult to eliminate, Nelson said. Washing an area with a heavy bleach solution is the best method, but not guaranteed.

He said the best recommendation is to remove anything fibrous that floodwater touched.

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