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FLOODING BRINGS WITH IT MICROSCOPIC NUISANCES

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By Elena Psarras, The Sun News

Illustration: PHOTO: 2 color

Caption: Top: Rhizopus produces spores in bags and is most often found on bread. Bottom: Penicilium looks like bony fingers and is often found on fabrics and painted surfaces.

Mold and mildew might become top enemies for homeowners recovering from floods.

Fungi cause health problems and more of them grow in the wet weather experienced this winter in Horry and Georgetown counties.

``My sinuses are driving me crazy," said Marilyn Gregory, whose home behind Socastee High School flooded. ``I'm living on Tylenol Sinus. The smell, it just smells like mold and mildew."

Molds and mildews can cause respiratory, allergy and asthma problems, said Craig DeWitt, a researcher with the South Carolina Energy Research and Development Center at Clemson University.

And warmer weather might not mean much improvement.

The accumulated moisture, and high humidity expected as temperatures rise, promise to create conditions ideal for mold and mildew growth.

Cooler temperatures have tempered such pests because heating systems remove indoor moisture, DeWitt said.

Once floodwaters go down, it will be easier to see the mold and mildew lurking underwater.

Spores are the only visible parts of mold.

``When you have a tomato you have the tomato spore," said Mike Ferguson, associate professor of biology at Coastal Carolina University. ``You don't see the whole tomato plant, just like you don't see the whole fungus."

Spores need 100 percent moisture for about eight hours to germinate, which makes flooded homes ideal candidates for mold growth, Ferguson said.

With drafts, spores become airborne, and this is when respiratory problems can result, Ferguson said. This can be a problem for anyone with a known mold allergy. Allergy symptoms such as watery eyes, sneezing, coughing and overactive sinuses can be expected. However, most people have a natural defense against fungi.

Families with infants 6 months old and younger should be aware of spores of the fungus *stachybotrys atra*. While it hasn't been proved, it appears that *stachybotrys* is responsible for infant deaths from pulmonary hemorrhage and hemosiderosis over the past four years in Cleveland, according to information found on Case Western Reserve University's Web site.

Stachybotrys needs water-soaked cellulose -- such as wood, paper and cotton products -- to grow. The fungus was found in some of the Cleveland homes where infants died.

Pulmonary hemorrhage is bleeding of the lungs caused by strong mycotoxins in the fungus' spores.

Stachybotrys appears black and slimy when wet, and less shiny when dry. There are other black molds to be found in the wake of floods, and *stachybotrys* is not the most common, according to the Web site.

Black or dark green mold growing on paint and fabrics, such as couches, come in several types, Ferguson said. *Caldosporium* is a typical mold that grows on paint. *Penicillium* and *aspergillous* can probably be found on papers, books and basement files.

``The important thing in cleaning mold is to try to keep it from becoming airborne," said Laura Kolb, environmental scientist for the indoor environments division for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Kolb suggested cleaning nonporous surfaces with a quarter-cup of bleach per gallon of water.

``I'd suggest getting things dried out as quickly as possible," said Dr. Bo Lowder of Doctor's Care in Surfside Beach. ``Don't stay in high humidity for too long."

Sinusitis, asthma and bronchitis have already been a part of this particularly heavy influenza season, Lowder said, and with the water, more cases will be seen.

In addition to the health issues mold and mildew pose, home renovations are inevitable. Gregory had a company out last week to clean the carpets, but with the rain her house filled with water again.

``It's filled up three separate times. There's no sense in doing anything until the water goes down," Gregory said.

The Atlantic Co. in Myrtle Beach is experiencing a business surge.

“I know most of the businesses like ours have been going on straight since the rain let up,” said Jan Foley, Atlantic's office manager. To combat mold and mildew, The Atlantic Co. sprays a fine mist on the carpet and walls.

Orkin in Myrtle Beach hasn't experienced an increase in calls with the rain, but expects calls once the water recedes. “Retreatment is going to be necessary” said Steve Lehman of Orkin. “Stuff is going to have to be redone.”

Gregory is expecting termites in her husband's wood shop, which was underwater late last week.

Rainwater that does not drain properly can rot wood underneath houses or lead to termite and other insect outbreaks. Corrugated pipe, which helps drain water, has been selling at Lowe's home-improvement warehouse in Myrtle Beach.

Homeowners should check foundations and crawl spaces to see whether standing water disappears after heavy rains.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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