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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

FUNGUS FACTS

ANSWERS ABOUT MOLD IN COURTHOUSE

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Memo: Q&A

This marks the first weekly feature looking at area issues and people in a question-and-answer format.

Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: ANNA MARIE DOS REMEDIOS -- MERCURY NEWS

The South County Courthouse was closed because of mold.

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Santa Clara County supervisors voted this week to close the 4-year-old South County Courthouse because it is erupting in a potentially toxic mold.

The mold, *Stachybotrys atra*, is caused by moisture leaking through the roof and windows of the \$6-million building. Similar cases have been reported around the country.

Here, national experts answer common questions about the troublesome fungus.

Q

How common is this mold?

A

More prevalent than most people realize, said Phil Morey, a microbiologist with Air Quality Sciences, an Atlanta-based consulting firm that specializes in these cases. Many cases never become public because businesses and hotels are not eager to advertise they have had a problem, Morey said. The most well-known cases involving government buildings were in Florida, where two county courthouses were closed because of the mold.

East of Tampa, in Polk County, a \$35 million, 10-story brick courthouse closed in 1992. It was rebuilt for a cost of \$45 million after a jury ruled in favor of the county against a variety of defendants, including contractors.

Another case

In another case, north of Fort Lauderdale, the Martin County Courthouse shut down in 1993 because of the mold. It was rebuilt for \$20 million, Morey said.

Q

What accounts for the apparent proliferation of this mold?

A

Stachybotrys has always been around. But it is proliferating indoors because the way buildings are constructed has changed, Morey said. Sixty years ago, builders used hard plaster, which is more resistant to decay. But modern buildings use wallboard and other cellulose materials, which breed this mold under wet conditions.

The material is fine as long as it stays dry. But if it gets consistently wet, Stachybotrys and other fungi can grow.

The mold has appeared in all kinds of buildings, including brick-clad structures. But buildings faced in certain supposedly watertight materials -- including the exterior insulation finishing system, or EIFS, that covers the South County Courthouse -- may be more susceptible because they tend to hold moisture in.

Q

Once the mold becomes visible, can it be eliminated without tearing down the building or most of the building?

A

It depends on how widespread it is. In many cases involving commercial buildings, walls or other infected material must be cleaned with a special vacuum or entirely removed, not just washed down, Morey said. Heating and ventilation systems may also be infected.

Health problems

Q

What health problems are linked to the mold?

A

The health effects differ markedly in adults and children, said Dr. Dorr Dearborn, a Cleveland researcher who has a federal grant from the National Institutes of Health to study the effects on infants. Stachybotrys was identified as the most likely cause of an outbreak of lung bleeding among infants in Cleveland that began in 1994 and has resulted in 12 deaths. Dearborn said experts are aware of 15 other similar infant deaths throughout the nation that have been linked to the mold through anecdotal evidence. But children must be directly exposed to the mold; the toxins cannot be carried home by parents

who work in an affected building.

Q

What effects are seen in adults?

A

The mold has not been attributed to any fatalities in adults. However, it generates toxins that can cause a wide variety of health problems, from mild to serious, including skin rashes, headache, digestive problems and throat irritation. Researchers are still studying the effects and hesitate to generalize, said Dr. Michael Hodgson, a physician with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Asthma-like symptoms

In Martin County, Fla., Hodgson said, about 15 adults suffered asthma-like symptoms from the mold found in the courthouse that was later closed. Adults generally have to be exposed for three to six months to experience any health effects, he said.

But damp buildings in general can create health problems regardless of the type of mold they produce, Hodgson said, noting that one study showed a fivefold increase in ill health among employees in damp buildings.

Another expert, Dr. Eckardt Johannung, of New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, said prolonged exposure to *Stachybotrys* can lead to effects similar to those from chemical exposures, including extreme fatigue and exhaustion that can last for years.

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