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Mold Found in Pupil's Lungs Adds to Classroom Controversy (6/28)

June 29, 1999

c.1999 Los Angeles Daily News

LOS ANGELES Worries about her little girl's health nagged at Jennifer Overlock for months, but she wrote off the frequent headaches and stomachaches as ``just part of growing up."

Then, the alarm went off: Chemicals used to build portable classrooms were found in blood samples of a classmate in Room 40 at Rio Vista Elementary School.

Tests on Overlock's 10-year-old daughter Ashle came back far worse than her mother expected.

The little girl had a poisonous mold growing in her lungs, a mold that researchers with the state Department of Health Services say has appeared in portable classrooms around the nation though tests, so far, show no signs of its spores in Santa Clarita classrooms, where at least five children and two teachers

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have tested positive for the poisonous stachybotrys.

Their symptoms range from headaches to nosebleeds, lethargy to upper respiratory distress. Initial blood and urine tests show high levels of residue from the formaldehyde, inorganic arsenic and other chemicals used routinely in plywood, carpeting and pressed board paneling that can fill the air in a poorly ventilated portable classroom, said Dr. Gary Ordog, head of toxicology at Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial Hospital.

“This is a highly toxic mold, and it can affect any area of the body,” Ordog said. “And with any kind of prolonged exposure you can see a wide range of symptoms.”

The mold, Ordog said, can harm the neurological system, cause headaches and nerve and memory problems. It also can affect the immune system, alter the chemicals in the blood and can damage the hormone systems, muscles, joints and lungs. Ordog has patients not only from Rio Vista, but from Charles Helmers Elementary in Valencia.

An environmental consultant hired by the Saugus Union School District to check suspect classrooms has found nontoxic molds, but none of the poisonous stachybotrys, said Mark Fulmer, the district's assistant superintendent of business services.

“So far, it doesn't appear to be coming from the classrooms,” Fulmer said last week, adding that the district is still waiting for more test results. “There's no evidence, but we're concerned, and we continue to explore. We've asked for help from the state and county health departments.”

The school district is working with experts in indoor air quality from UCLA and California State University, Northridge. A UCLA environmental toxicologist can be reached through the Saugus district for parents with questions.

Fulmer and some parents said the neighborhood around Helmers is known to be on a high water table, perhaps encouraging mold growth all around.

“One parent told me there was black mold on her grass at home,” Fulmer said.

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One mother said it isn't unusual to dig a hole to plant a tree and the hole fills with water.

That's very possible, said Robert DiPrimio, president of the Valencia Water Co. Last year's El Nino rains left behind moisture that is slowly sinking into underground waterways and remains closer to the surface than usual.

And Rio Vista Spanish for "river view" sits on the banks of the Santa Clara River, normally dry on the surface, but a key supply of groundwater.

"There's no question there's something making kids sick. It's just a question of what it is," said one mother who asked not to be identified.

Her second-grader at Helmers had tested negative for any allergies but suffered chronic allergy-type symptoms during her months in Room 30. Three days in a row in January, the school nurse called the mother to pick up her child because she was sick, but the symptoms disappeared when the little girl came home. Tests results are due any day.

Parents at both schools say they have sneaked into the abandoned classes and seen a black mold growing under the carpet or the wall coverings.

"They had wallpaper falling and you could see mold growing there," Overlock said.

Stachybotrys grows when leaf debris or paper or wood products are soaking wet for a long period of time, and isn't harmful until it dries and the spores go airborne, said Sandy McNeel, a research scientist with the state Department of Health Services.

That could have happened at Helmers, where Room 30 sits on a playground drain, which clogged last year and left stagnant water under the class for months, parents and researchers said.

In a June 8 letter to the school district, Ordog suggested that the suspect portable classroom at Rio Vista be abandoned until thoroughly checked by experts in mold.

"It is my professional opinion, based upon my education and experience, that this portable is currently not habitable by anyone until it is cleaned and tested for sterility," Ordog wrote in a letter to Fulmer.

"Exposure to this mold could be extremely hazardous to anyone's health."

Ordog's letter was prompted by Ashle Overlock's diagnosis and released with her mother's permission. The little girl, he said, showed classic symptoms of stachybotrys infection. Her grades were falling and she felt lethargic, signs of the mold attacking the nervous system.

``Please note that this is not the only isolate of stachybotrys," Ordog wrote. ``There are now at least six other patients from portables in the Saugus district who are complaining of feeling ill while in the classrooms and who (have tested positive) for high levels of stachybotrys."

His prescription for Ashle has been a special dietary supplement with vitamins and anti-oxidants and an hour a day in a spa to sweat out the toxins, her mother said.

At Helmers, a lack of communication, the sudden abandonment of a classroom with no word home to parents and the school's decision to forbid children from removing backpacks, books and other items from their classroom once summer vacation came has unnerved parents and their children.

``All these kids are freaked out," said the one unidentified mother. ``They're walking around saying there's a fungus in the room and it's going to kill everyone.

``What we need to do is keep looking for the source. We're grasping at straws here. You've got to hope that sooner or later you grab the right one."

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