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Mystery illness linked to a water-loving mold

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Alan Bavley
 New York Times Syndicate

It happened suddenly last December to 1-month-old William Rippey of Kansas City, Mo. His mother, Jodie Atherton, found him crying in pain. She picked him up. His breathing sounded funny. He began to pant.

Atherton got William to the Children's Mercy emergency room, where doctors saved his life.

"He was drowning in his own fluids," hospital pediatrician Ken Wible said. "They were sucking blood from his endotracheal tube."

William remained in the hospital for a week. Meantime, Flappan visited his home and discovered the likely cause of William's illness.

Above the closet of the baby's room was a leak in the roof. Stachybotrys was growing on the closet wall and ceiling.

William's father scrubbed out the closet and the roof leak was repaired. William has been healthy since.

Many buildings harbor Stachybotrys, said David Straus, a professor of microbiology at Texas Tech University who investigates complaints of

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sick-building syndrome.

The syndrome refers to a collection of maladies in people, including runny eyes and noses and flulike symptoms caused by indoor air pollution.

In a study published last year of sick-building syndrome in 48 schools along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, Straus found that most had problems with either Penicillium mold, which can cause allergic reactions such as hay fever, or Stachybotrys.

“Anytime we find Stachybotrys in a school, it correlates very nicely with sick-building syndrome,” Straus said.

Stachybotrys forced the Missouri Division of Youth Services last year to close the program at an office for children who have had run-ins with the law. Those children now attend a similar program.

The mold appeared after the building was flooded by rains last summer.

“It was growing 12 to 15 inches up the wall. In the cabinets. It was everywhere,” said Gail Mumford, the division's regional administrator.

Staff members weren't very concerned at first. Then came the headaches, runny noses and itchy eyes.

To escape the mold, the state moved its employees from the first floor to the second floor, which was Stachybotrys-free.

Some experts say Stachybotrys doesn't deserve to be called a lethal mold.

“It's been well known that mold in general is related to respiratory symptoms...,” Mannino said. “Virtually no one at CDC says anymore that toxic molds kill babies.”

Researchers who investigated cases of infant lung bleeding in Chicago and Detroit were unable to find the same link to Stachybotrys discovered in Cleveland, Mannino said.

The connection between Stachybotrys and deadly illness remains controversial among some scientists because it's very difficult to prove, said Berlin Nelson, a professor of plant pathology at North Dakota State University.

“Certainly, there's enough evidence that if you inhale enough of it you're going to get sick. But we don't know how much you have to inhale,” Nelson said.

Removing Stachybotrys can be an expensive and laborious process.

“It's pretty scary when they come out in their full-body suits and respirators,” said Laurie Chubb about the workers who removed Stachybotrys from the basement playroom of her Overland Park house last year.

Workers pulled up carpet and padding, ripped apart a built-in cabinet, and tore out insulation and wallboard. Anything that couldn't be removed was bleached. The bill was \$765, although the cost can range from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per room.

But Laurie and her husband, Steve, consider that money well spent.

Two years ago, their son Brian, now 3, had a constant runny nose, wheezing and a cough like a smoker's hack every morning and evening. Just after his second birthday, he was diagnosed with asthma. His doctor prescribed four kinds of inhalers.

The Chubbs had Flappan inspect their house. She found significant amounts of airborne mold spores in Brian's room and the playroom.

The Chubbs moved Brian into his older brother's bedroom. They had the air ducts and carpets cleaned and installed an electronic furnace filter.

Mold levels declined, but Brian still had asthma attacks. Flappan made another visit. Laurie Chubb pointed out discolored wallboard from a basement leak: It tested positive for *Stachybotrys*.

That's when the Chubbs had their playroom ripped out. Brian's symptoms have disappeared. He no longer needs asthma medications.

"There's no doubt in our minds that *Stachybotrys* was the cause of the problem," Laurie Chubb said.

Some homeowners are choosing to litigate when faced with water damage and *Stachybotrys*.

Jan and Anita Fichman became the talk of south Leawood last year when they wrapped blue plastic sheeting around their \$500,000 Hallbrook house to keep out water.

They sued Hallbrook Realty, their builder and others, saying faulty construction let water into the house and allowed *Stachybotrys* to grow inside the walls.

The couple said the mold caused them and their two young sons to have recurring eye irritation, sinus infections, headaches and other allergic reactions.

The Fichmans eventually removed the plastic and settled their lawsuit, but they are prohibited by terms of the settlement from discussing the matter.

Research into *Stachybotrys* is under way at several medical centers to discover how the mold causes illness.

Dearborn of Case Western Reserve has found that newborn rats will die of lung bleeding when quantities of *Stachybotrys* spores are put into their lungs.

But he still is trying to explain how human infants might die by inhaling small amounts of spores.

Another reason for doubts about *Stachybotrys*' role in illness is that the mold often does not turn up in cultures from air samples. That's because the airborne spores die quickly, Dearborn said, even though their toxins remain dangerous for years.

Dearborn is working with the EPA on new genetic tests to identify molds from spores in air samples.

But the evidence against *Stachybotrys* is strong enough already to warrant caution, said Eross of the EPA.

"We can't wait for the definitive answer of how it gets from point A to B," he

said. ``There is obviously a connection between Stachybotrys and bad health effects. The thing to do is avoid it."



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