



New York City Department of Health
Environmental and Occupational Disease Prevention

Facts About Mold

The New York City Health Department has developed this fact sheet to address some of the most common questions and concerns regarding mold.

What is mold and where is it found?

Molds (fungi) are present EVERYWHERE -indoors and outdoors. They serve an important, positive role, by helping to break down organic matter. There are more than 100,000 species of mold. At least 1,000 species of molds are common in the U.S.

Some of the most common molds found are species of Cladosporium, Penicillium, and Aspergillus. Mold is most likely to grow where there is water or dampness -- such as in bathrooms and basements.

How can molds affect your health?

The most common types of mold are generally not hazardous to healthy individuals. However, people who have asthma, hayfever, or other allergies or have weakened immune systems are more likely to react to mold. The most common symptoms are running nose, eye irritation, cough, congestion, and aggravation of asthma. A small percentage of the population can develop more serious effects -- such as fevers and breathing difficulties -- but these effects are uncommon. Some types of mold can cause more serious health problems, but this is much more rare.

How can you be exposed to mold?

When moldy material becomes damaged or disturbed, spores (reproductive bodies similar to seeds) can be released into the air. Exposure can occur if people inhale the spores or directly handle mold-containing material and accidentally ingest it. Some molds can produce chemicals called mycotoxins. Mycotoxins may cause illness in persons who are sensitive to them (for example, persons who are prone to allergies) or when persons are exposed to large amounts in the air (typically associated with certain occupations).

What is Stachybotrys Chartarum?

Stachybotrys chartarum (SC) (also known as Stachybotrys atra) is one mold that is associated with health effects in people. SC is a greenish-black mold that can grow on materials with a high cellulose content (such as drywall sheetrock, dropped ceiling tiles, and wood) that become chronically moist or water-damaged, due to excessive humidity, water leaks, condensation, or flooding. SC is a relatively uncommon mold. SC spores do not become easily airborne; therefore, contamination of indoor air by SC is unusual.

How can you tell if SC is present in your home?

All mold needs water to grow. Mold can grow anywhere there is water damage, high humidity or dampness. Most often molds are confined to areas near the source of water. Removing the source of moisture, such as through repairs or dehumidification, is critical to preventing mold growth. Many molds are black in appearance but are not SC, for example, the black mold commonly found between bathroom

tiles. SC can only be positively identified through microscopic exam or by specially trained professionals.

How can SC affect your health?

Typically, indoor air levels of SC are low; and therefore not generally hazardous to health. However, as with other molds, at higher levels health effects can occur. These include allergic rhinitis (cold like symptoms), dermatitis (rashes), sinusitis, conjunctivitis, and aggravation of asthma. Some related symptoms are more general, such as inability to concentrate and fatigue. Usually symptoms disappear after the contamination is removed.

There has been some evidence linking SC with pulmonary hemosiderosis, a condition that causes bleeding in the lungs of infants generally less than six months old. This is a very rare condition. In cases of hemosiderosis, the exposure to SC came from highly contaminated dwellings, where the infants were continually exposed over a long period of time.

What should you do if mold is present in your home or apartment?

Although any visible mold can be tested by an environmental consultant and/or analyzed by a laboratory specializing in microbiology, these tests can be very expensive -- from hundreds to thousands of dollars. There is no simple and cheap way to sample the air in your home to find out what types of mold are present and if they are airborne. As noted above, even if you had your home tested, it is difficult to say at what levels molds would cause health effects. Therefore, it is more important get rid of the mold rather than find out more about it. The most effective way to treat mold is to correct underlying water damage and clean the affected area.

How should mold be cleaned?

Mold should be cleaned as soon as it appears. Persons cleaning mold should be free of symptoms and allergies. Use a common household bleach and water mix (1 part bleach to 10 parts water) to clean it. You can add a little dish soap to the bleach and water mix to cut any dirt and oil on the wall that can hold mold. Do not add ammonia. This can result in dangerous vapors. Apply the bleach and water mix to the surface with a sponge, let it sit for 15 minutes, then thoroughly dry the surface. Dispose of any sponges or rags used to clean mold.

If the mold returns quickly or spreads, it may indicate an underlying problem such as a leak. Any underlying water problems must be fixed to successfully eliminate mold problems. If mold contamination is extensive, a professional abatement company may need to be consulted.

Will my health or my child's health be affected and should we see a physician?

If you believe that you or your children have symptoms that you suspect are caused by exposure to mold, you should see a physician. Keep in mind that many symptoms associated with mold exposure may also be caused by many other illnesses. You should tell your physician about the symptoms and about when, how, and for how long you think you or your children were exposed.

Who can I call if I suspect I have a mold problem or if I want more information?

For more information about the health effects of mold exposure and information on the safe removal of mold, please call the New York City Department of Health, Bureau of Environmental Investigations at (212) 442-3372 or the Bureau of Environmental and Occupational Disease Prevention at (212) 788-4290.

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