

Mold More Than a Nuisance – It Can Be Hazardous

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Mold, mildew and fungi are a pervasive and essential part of the world's ecological system – and they're becoming a growing concern for those who build, buy, sell and rent homes. Recent floods in Western Washington heightened awareness of potential problems posed by mold.

A study of 10,000 homes across the U.S. by Harvard University found half the homes it examined had mold damage. In an article published by the American Bar Association, legal experts predicted litigation claiming mold-related damages will proliferate and surpass asbestos in the magnitude of claims against manufacturers, owners and insurers, even though medical science is unclear about a significant link between toxic mold and serious health risks.

The presence of mold in residential and commercial buildings is generating a new wave of litigation against builders, building owners, and property managers for personal injury and property damage, according to Mold Solutions NW, an exhibitor at the 2007 Northwest Builders Show. The company was showcasing a patented product to prevent or address mold problems in new and remodeled buildings.

With litigation and remediation costs escalating at a rapid clip, mold is a subject the real estate industry cannot ignore:

- More than one-fourth – 28 percent – of builders reported having mold issues during construction, according to a report by the National Association of Home Builders.
- Beginning in 2004, the insurance industry began excluding mold coverage from all homeowner and builder General Liability policies.
- Mold is the main force that's driving up insurance rates for contractors and homeowners alike, according to Mold Solutions NW.

Scientific and medical literature contains differing opinions about the potential health impacts of exposure to mold, according a white paper published by Mold Solutions NW. That company, based in North Bend, Wash., also notes there is conflicting information about the proper methods for investigating and the remediation of mold, resulting in uncertainty and fear.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, homeowners should be mindful of 10 facts about mold:

1. Potential health effects and symptoms associated with mold exposures include allergic reactions, asthma, and other respiratory complaints.
2. There is no practical way to eliminate all mold and mold spores in the indoor environment; the way to control indoor mold growth is to control moisture.
3. If mold is a problem in your home or school, you must clean up the mold and eliminate sources of moisture.

4. Fix the source of the water problem or leak to prevent mold growth.
5. Reduce indoor humidity (to 30-60%) to decrease mold growth by: venting bathrooms, dryers, and other moisture-generating sources to the outside; using air conditioners and de-humidifiers; increasing ventilation; and using exhaust fans whenever cooking, dishwashing, and cleaning.
6. Clean and dry any damp or wet building materials and furnishings within 24-48 hours to prevent mold growth.
7. Clean mold off hard surfaces with water and detergent, and dry completely. Absorbent materials such as ceiling tiles, that are moldy, may need to be replaced.
8. Prevent condensation: Reduce the potential for condensation on cold surfaces (i.e., windows, piping, exterior walls, roof, or floors) by adding insulation.
9. In areas where there is a perpetual moisture problem, do not install carpeting (i.e., by drinking fountains, by classroom sinks, or on concrete floors with leaks or frequent condensation).
10. Molds can be found almost anywhere; they can grow on virtually any substance, providing moisture is present. There are molds that can grow on wood, paper, carpet, and foods.

As a general rule, Certified Hazardous Materials Manager Kenton Beal says, "If you can see and/or smell evidence of mold, you probably have it." He recommends taking note of suspicious discoloration of walls or ceiling tiles and being wary of musty odors since mold exposure problems can increase dramatically if ignored.

The head of a pin can hold more 100,000 spores of mold, according to Beal, who is also a Certified Indoor Environmentalist. "It is imperative that mold removal be done correctly," he emphasizes.

No home is immune from mold problems, according to Mold Solutions NW. In its White Paper, the company outlined several strategies to help minimize mold growth:

- Take notice of musty odors in the home because they indicate the presence of mold. Look for visible signs of mold and abate the moisture source.
- Watch for condensation and wet spots and eliminate sources of moisture.
- Prevent moisture resulting from condensation by increasing surface temperatures or reducing moisture levels in the air. To increase the surface temperature, insulate or increase the circulation of heated air. To reduce moisture levels in the air, repair leaks, increase ventilation (if outside air is cold and dry), or dehumidify.
- Perform building and HVAC inspections and maintenance. Repair the condensate drain if the air conditioning system's drip pan overflows with water.
- Vent clothes dryers to the outdoors.
- Run the air conditioner and/or a dehumidifier during the humid months of the year.
- Controlling indoor air moisture to below 65 percent relative humidity will limit the probability of supporting mold growth.
- Keep the relative humidity as low as is comfortable during the winter season for houses in cold climates. Mold growth on interior surfaces of exterior walls can occur during the heating season. The combination of cool surfaces and excessive humidity can cause a high near-surface relative humidity and condensation. Experience has shown that an air moisture level below 40 percent

relative humidity during the heating season will prevent condensation on surfaces. This level of humidity may not be appropriate for houses in severe cold climates. A sign of excessive humidity is condensation on the inside of windows. If condensation is present for prolonged periods take steps to reduce the moisture source or increase ventilation.

- Clean and dry any wet or damp areas within 48 hours.
- Provide drainage for roof rainwater and maintain the ground with a slope that drains water away from the foundation.
- Repair water leaks in the building envelope as soon as possible.
- Do not store organic materials such as paper, books, clothes, etc., in humid locations (such as in unconditioned basements).
- Exercise extra care when cleaning up after water damage from flood and sewer water.
- Consider the use of dehumidifiers in areas such as unconditioned basements.

State health agencies and experts do not recommend testing to determine if you have a mold problem, according to research compiled by Mold Solutions NW. In addition to being expensive, mold sampling requires special equipment and trained technicians to acquire reliable samples and test results. An additional concern is the lack of standards for what is an acceptable concentration of mold.

Recognizing growing concerns about the presence of mold, Mold Solutions, headquartered in Illinois (with a local franchise in North Bend), adapted a technology developed and licensed by Emory University called Microbe Guard. The surface modifying antimicrobial treatment, applied in a five-step process, creates a new surface that resists microbial attack. The product's makers claim it does not off-gas, leach, diffuse, migrate, volatilize or otherwise leave the surface to which they have been applied.

The water-based product uses EPA registered antimicrobials to create a permanent barrier that prevents the growth of mold, mildew, bacteria and fungi. The products are a recognized component of the LEED green building rating system developed by the United States Green Building Council. The Built Green program of the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties has also rated the product eligible for points within its Built Green single-family checklist.

For more information:

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/mold/> (includes Fact Sheets, FAQs and resources)
2. <http://www.epa.gov/mold/moldresources.html> (includes explanation about molds, basic information on cleanup, glossary of terms, downloadable publications)
3. www.moldsolutionsnw.com

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SKCAR: Phone: 425-974-1011 | Toll Free: 800-540-3277 | Fax: 425-974-1032
12410 SE 32nd St., Suite 100, Bellevue, WA 98005

NWMLS: Phone: 425-820-9200 | Toll Free: 800-541-0455 | Fax: 425-821-3750
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