

MOLD

PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

Molds have the potential to cause health problems. They produce allergens (substances that can cause allergic reactions), irritants, and in some cases, potentially toxic substances (mycotoxins). Inhaling or touching mold or mold spores may cause allergic reactions in sensitive individuals. These may include hay fever-type symptoms, such as sneezing, runny nose, red eyes, and skin rash (dermatitis). Allergic reactions to mold can be immediate or delayed and will often happen more readily with repeated exposure. They are known to be asthma triggers in sensitive individuals. Research into the public health effects of mold is ongoing and you are advised to consult a physician if exposure to mold has adverse effects on your health.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

At present, there are no federal or local regulatory methods or exposure limits for airborne fungal spores for indoor air quality in New Hampshire or the United States. Mold growth is always associated with wet or damp locations. The presence of mold indicates water is entering the structure through excessive condensation, a plumbing or structural leak or improper drainage.

- **RSA 48A Housing Standards;** <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/NHTOC/NHTOC-III-48-A.htm>. In some cases the Housing Standards may be applicable. [RSA 48A:14](#) contains language about floors, walls or ceilings that contain substantial holes that seriously reduce their function or render them dangerous to the inhabitants. This RSA may be applicable if the substantial holes lead to water or moisture infiltration.
- **RSA 540-A Prohibited Practices and Security Deposits;** <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/NHTOC/NHTOC-LV-540-A.htm>
This RSA which addresses rental properties may be applicable in some cases. Should significant mold growth be the result of a code violation, (i.e. a plumbing leak) action can be taken to enforce the code. Though RSA 540-A may be useful in some circumstances, it is not enforced by the community Health Officer.

ROLE OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER

The public health officer should serve as a local resource for indoor air quality information regarding building dampness and indoor mold. The health officer may conduct site visits and make recommendations to remediate the problem.

The Environmental Protection Agency brochure, '[A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home](#)' is a helpful source of information. While there are no regulatory methods or exposure limits for airborne fungal spores for indoor air quality, RSA 540-A, which addresses rental properties, may be applicable in some cases. Should significant mold growth be the result of a code violation, (i.e. a plumbing leak) action can be taken to enforce the code.

BACKGROUND

Are some molds more hazardous than others?

Some types of mold are more hazardous because they can produce chemical compounds called mycotoxins. They do not, however, always do so. Molds that are able to produce toxins include some common types. In some circumstances, these toxins may cause more serious health problems. Moreover, wet surfaces themselves may cause chemicals and particles to be released from building materials, which may be the source of health problems as well. Regardless of whether mold produces toxins, all indoor mold growth is potentially problematic and should be removed promptly.

How do I tell if I have a mold problem in my home?

Investigate. The most practical way to find a mold problem is by using your eyes and nose to locate mold growth. If you see mold or if there is an earthy or musty smell, you should assume a mold problem exists. Other clues are signs of excess moisture or the worsening of allergy-like symptoms. While investigating your home:

- Look for visible mold growth, which may appear cottony, velvety, granular or leathery, and have varied colors of white, gray, brown, black, yellow or green. Mold often appears as a discoloration, staining, or fuzzy growth on the surface of building materials or furnishings.
- Search areas with noticeable mold odors.
- Look for signs of excess moisture or water damage. Look for water leaks, standing water, water stains, and condensation problems. For example, do you see watermarks or discoloration on walls, ceilings, carpeting, woodwork or other surfaces.
- Search behind and underneath materials (carpets and pads, wallpaper, vinyl flooring, sink cabinets), furniture, or stored items, especially things placed near outside walls or on cold floors. Sometimes destructive techniques may be needed to inspect and clean enclosed spaces where mold and moisture are hidden; for example, opening up a wall cavity.

Should I test for mold?

In most cases, testing for mold is not necessary. Instead, you should simply assume there is a problem whenever you see mold or smell mold odors. Hiring a contractor to test for mold could use up valuable resources that are needed to correct moisture problems and remove existing mold growth. It may be a better use of resources to hire a contractor to eliminate the source of moisture. Sometimes mold growth is hidden and difficult to locate. In such cases, a combination of outdoor and indoor air samples and material samples may help determine the extent of contamination and where cleaning is needed. However, mold testing is rarely useful for trying to answer questions about health concerns.

CLEAN-UP & REMOVAL

How do I get rid of mold?

It is impossible to get rid of all mold and mold spores indoors; some mold spores will be found floating through the air and in house dust. The mold spores will not grow if moisture is not present. Indoor mold growth can and should be prevented or controlled by controlling moisture indoors. If there is mold growth in your home, you must clean up the mold **and** fix the water problem. If you clean up the mold, but don't fix the water problem, then, most likely, the mold problem will come back.

Who should do the cleanup?

Who should do the cleanup depends on a number of factors. One consideration is the size of the mold problem. If the moldy area is less than about 10 square feet (less than roughly a 3 ft. by 3 ft. patch), in most cases, you can handle the job yourself, following the guidelines below. However:

- If there has been a lot of water damage, and/or mold growth covers more than 10 square feet, consult the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guide: [Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings](#). Although focused on schools and commercial buildings, this document is applicable to other building types. It is available on the Internet at: www.epa.gov/mold.
- If you choose to hire a contractor (or other professional service provider) to do the cleanup, make sure the contractor has experience cleaning up mold. Check references and ask the contractor to follow the recommendations in [EPA's Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings](#), the guidelines of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH), or other guidelines from professional or government organizations.
- If you suspect that the heating/ventilation/air conditioning (HVAC) system may be contaminated with mold (it is part of an identified moisture problem, for instance, or there is mold near the intake to the system), consult EPA's guide [Should You Have the AirDucts in Your Home Cleaned?](#) before taking further action. Do not run the HVAC system if you know or suspect that it is contaminated with mold - it could spread mold throughout the building. Visit www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs to download a copy of the EPA guide.
- If the water and/or mold damage was caused by sewage or other contaminated water, then call in a professional who has experience cleaning and fixing buildings damaged by contaminated water.
- If you have health concerns, consult a health professional before starting cleanup.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Refer to the US Environmental Protection Agency brochure, '[A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home](#)', the NH Department of Environmental Services '[Mold in Your Home?](#)' for additional information regarding investigation and clean-up, and the New Hampshire Mold Task Force [Standard of Care for the New Hampshire Mold Industry](#) for information regarding how mold testing and remediation should be performed.

For more information:

US Environmental Protection Agency – Region 1

(888) 372-7341

www.epa.gov/mold