

Infection Prevention and You



Molds

What is mold?

Molds are one of two groups of fungi (the other group is yeast) that live in the outdoors or can live indoors. Molds grow in wet, damp and humid conditions; they reproduce by making tiny spores. The spores are not visible to the naked eye, and they can float in the air. Mold spores serve a function similar to that of seeds in plants; they germinate and grow into new mold under conditions of moisture, the right temperature and availability of food. Spores can also survive in incompatible conditions for periods of time.

Who is at greatest risk for mold illness or infection?

Molds have the potential to cause health problems. People with breathing conditions such as asthma or allergies may be especially susceptible to mold illness or infection. If you have an allergy to mold, you may experience shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. People with weak immune systems from diseases such as HIV infection, cancer patients taking chemotherapy and persons who have had an organ transplant are more susceptible to infections from mold. Persons with chronic lung conditions may also develop infections.

Mold sensitivity symptoms

- Nasal congestion
- Eye irritation
- Wheezing
- Skin irritation

Mold can be found outdoors in decomposing vegetation or dark, damp, shady areas. Indoors, molds are most likely found in areas where there is high humidity such as basements, laundry areas, bathrooms or areas with water leaks from faucets, pipes and/or roofs. Areas that may have been flooded by water from hurricanes, storms or floods can also be affected by molds. You can see evidence of mold; walls and ceilings may be discolored, show signs of water damage or mold growth. You may also smell an unpleasant musty odor like an earthy smell or a foul stench. Mold may also be hidden behind paneling or wallpaper. Be very cautious when looking for hidden mold -- when you disturb areas, such as behind wallpaper, you could cause spores to be released into the air.

Controlling mold

Controlling moisture in your home is the most important step in preventing mold growth. Clean up and dry out any wet areas as soon as possible. Open doors and windows, use fans, and remove any items that cannot be cleaned and dried (especially if wet for 48 hours or more).

To prevent mold from growing, clean wet items and surfaces with detergent and water. You can remove mold from hard surfaces with commercial products, soap and water, or a bleach solution of no more than 1 cup of bleach in 1 gallon of water.

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When using bleach, remember:

- Never mix bleach with ammonia or other household cleaners. Mixing bleach with other products can produce toxic fumes.
- Open doors and windows for ventilation
- Wear non-porous gloves and eye protection
- Always follow manufacturers' instructions when using cleaning products

If you will be cleaning mold for a period of time, you should buy an N-95 mask at a home supply store. Follow directions for properly fitting the mask to your face.

To decrease the chance of mold:

- Keep the humidity level in your house down to 40- 60 percent
- Use an air conditioner or dehumidifier during very humid weather
- Make sure your home has good ventilation
- If you are painting, add mold inhibitors
- Clean bathrooms well to prevent mold buildup
- Do not carpet bathrooms, basements, or other areas that may become damp or wet.

If you or your family members have developed any health problems after exposure to mold, see your healthcare provider.

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