

Mold Fact Sheet



University of Tennessee Knoxville
Environmental Health and Safety

WHAT IS MOLD?

Mold is a naturally occurring fungus that is found in the environment. It grows on plants, food, and even walls. While some mold (such as the ones responsible for producing cheese and penicillin) are beneficial, others may be a serious health threat. Molds produce microscopic cells called spores which can spread easily through the air and can form new mold growth on surfaces when conditions are right. Above all else, molds need moisture to live and grow.

WHAT FACTORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR MOLD GROWTH?

The two factors that are most important for mold growth are moisture and a food source. Moisture can come from many sources including very high humidity levels, condensation, and plumbing leaks. Food sources for mold can be common building materials such as drywall, ceiling tiles and natural fibers.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF MOLD?

Mold is usually not a problem indoors unless it finds a damp environment and starts to multiply. It can produce allergens, irritants, and in some cases, mycotoxins.

Many people have no reaction to mold. Allergic reactions and irritation are the most common health effects for people sensitive to mold. Exposure can also trigger asthma attacks in people diagnosed with asthma.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a link between mold and other health effects such as memory loss, lethargy, and acute idiopathic pulmonary hemorrhage among infants has NOT been proven.

The term “Toxic Mold” is often used by the media, but it is not accurate. While some molds do produce toxins, the molds themselves are not toxic or poisonous. Hazards presented by molds that produce mycotoxins are the same as other common molds that may grow in your home.

WHERE IS MOLD FOUND?

Mold spores are present everywhere both outdoors and indoors and spread easily through the air. In East Tennessee, we have an unusually high levels of mold outdoors.

HOW DOES IT GET INTO BUILDINGS?

Mold is present in all buildings. There is no practical way to eliminate all mold and spores in the indoor environment; It is when mold levels inside exceed those outside that we say that there is a “mold problem.”



WHEN WILL MOLD GROW INSIDE A BUILDING?

Mold needs a food source, measurable moisture (measured by relative humidity) and mild to warm temperatures. The food source can be any organic material such as dust, books, papers, animal dander, soap scum, wood, particle board, paint, wallpaper, carpet, and upholstery.

When these materials become and stay damp, especially in dark areas with poor air circulation, mold may grow.

Flooding, pipe leaks, leaky roofs, moisture in walls, high indoor humidity and poor heating/air-conditioning system design and operation can create the damp environment that mold needs to grow. If you can smell a musty odor or see mold, you may have a mold problem. If you suspect you have a mold problem, you should contact EHS for more information.

WHAT ARE THE REGULATIONS CONCERNING MOLD?

No federal or state regulations exist for mold exposure.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY'S ROLE?

EHS can come to your work area and conduct an assessment to determine if high levels of mold is present. If sampling is needed, there will be additional charges to the department for analysis. Please contact EHS at 974-5084 for more information.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can help inhibit the growth of mold in buildings and improve indoor air quality for all occupants by keeping humidity below 60%, reporting water leaks immediately, ensuring that your trash is put out regularly, and that food is stored in appropriate locations.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP AND MORE INFORMATION?

For more information please contact EHS at 974-5084.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

U.S. EPA: "A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home" <http://www.epa.gov/mold/moldguide.html>

U.S. EPA: "Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings" http://www.epa.gov/mold/mold_remediation.html

CDC National Center for Environmental Health: "Mold" <http://www.cdc.gov/mold/>

Tennessee Department of Health: <http://health.state.tn.us/environmental/mold.htm>