

MOLD

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It is summer, a time when those who suffer from seasonal allergies experience symptoms of sneezing, nasal congestion, runny nose, and itchy and watery eyes. Some people even have difficulty breathing. Often these symptoms are related to pollen in the air, but mold is also a big problem during spring, summer and fall causing allergy symptoms in people who are sensitive to it.

People at highest risk of health effects from exposure to mold are asthmatics, infants and children, the elderly, immune-compromised patients, and people who already have respiratory conditions.

Mold is found almost everywhere, both outdoors and indoors. Molds, along with mushrooms and yeasts, are *fungi* and are needed to break down dead material and recycle nutrients in the environment. It is the seeds, or spores, releasing their mycotoxins into the environment that contribute to the mold allergy. These spores, which are usually so small they cannot be seen by the naked eye, float through the air, settle on surfaces and grow if they have environments to support it, developing new colonies of mold.

Conditions that support mold growth include food sources made of organic materials, warm temperatures, moisture and oxygen. Some examples of outdoor food sources include dead trees, fallen leaves and cut grass. The best way to avoid outdoor mold allergy triggers is to stay away from areas that are damp and shaded and where there is heavy vegetation, hay or straw, or grass that has recently been cut.

Indoors mold thrives on paper, wood, dry wall, cardboard, grout, plaster and natural fiber clothing, such as wool and cotton. Mold can be many colors (white, black, orange, green, brown), depending on the species present. Mold can be fuzzy or slimy to the touch. The “black mold,” or *Stychybotrys chartarum*, commonly talked about in the news is uncommon in Broome County homes. An intensive sampling program by the Health Department during 2001-2003 found only a few instances of this mold, generally, but not always, on drywall in flooded basements.

The most effective way to avoid allergies from mold growth indoors is to take measures to ensure your living environment is clean and dry. If your home has a source of moisture that can support mold growth, such as a leaky roof or pipes, damp concrete walls or floors, damp bathrooms or laundry rooms, take measures to eliminate the moisture immediately.

If mold is present in your home, proper clean up and remediation is important. Once the source of moisture is eliminated, the mold must be removed. Moldy porous materials, like drywall, fabric, or carpeting must often be thrown out, as they cannot be thoroughly cleaned. Depending on the size of the contaminated area you may be able to do the clean up yourself. If there is a large infestation, however, you may require the help of a professional.

If you choose to do the clean up yourself, avoid exposing yourself to mold and mold spores by wearing an N-95 respirator, which can be purchased at many hardware stores, goggles, gloves and adequate ventilation. Keep skin covered and wash thoroughly after clean up is complete and contaminated materials are removed from the home.

For a free copy of the booklet, *A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home*, contact the Environmental Protection Agency Indoor Air Quality Information clearinghouse at (800) 438-4318 or download it on the Internet at www.epa.gov/iaq/molds. To hear general information about mold call the Broome County Health Department Recorded Information Line at 778-3911, Option 5. To obtain more specific information about the health effects of mold exposure visit the Broome County Health Department website at www.gobroomecounty.com/safety or, if you do not have internet access, contact the Broome County Health Department at 778-2887 to request it be mailed to you. This readily available information will provide the direction you will need to identify and correct indoor air problems.