

# What You Should Know About Mold

## WHAT IS MOLD?

Mold is types of fungus found just about everywhere—on plants, mulch, and even foods. They are beneficial to the environment because they break down dead carbon-containing material, and, without them, leaves, grass, wood, paper and other cellulose materials would never rot away. Fungi (yeasts) are used in baking and when making beer, wine, and cheese. Fungi are also found in other foods including soy sauce and sausages, to name a few. Certain types of mold have proven extremely valuable in the production of antibiotics, steroids, vitamins, and other important products.

Mold produces spores, very tiny and lightweight reproductive bodies that travel easily through the air. However, when mold is present in large numbers, they may cause symptoms in some people that are similar to allergies caused by plant pollens.

The coastal air of Southern California typically contains 2,000 mold spores in every cubic meter of air. Other parts of the country, especially agricultural regions, may contain 10,000 mold spores in a cubic meter of air. According to reported information for Chicago, IL, over the last couple of years some daily mold counts have exceeded the threshold of 50,000 spores per cubic meter that is indicative of dangerous air quality. So you see, mold spores are part of our every day lives.

Mold is found both indoors and outdoors—in the air and on many surfaces. Mold can enter your home through open doorways, windows, vents, and heating and air conditioning systems. Mold in the air outside can also attach itself to clothing, shoes, bags, and pets and can be carried indoors.

## HOW DOES MOLD GROW?

Mold spores, which are invisible to the naked eye, are constantly floating through outdoor and indoor air. Mold may begin growing indoors when the spores land on surfaces that are wet. Mold spores in the indoor air are usually innocuous, unless they happen to land on a food source where an appropriate level of moisture, temperature, and oxygen is present. At that point they will begin to grow, digesting whatever they are living on and gradually destroy it. Given their natural presence, it is virtually impossible to eliminate all mold and mold spores in the indoor environment, nor is it necessary.

Almost anything can be a food source for mold. Examples include just about everything in your house: cellulose materials (insulation, paper products, ceiling tiles and wood), carpet, dust, paint, wallpaper, wallboard, insulation, and even furniture. Even a small amount of moisture that stays in your house

may be enough to allow the mold spores to grow. Water sources can come from leaking pipes, roofs, or windows, flooding, overflows from the washing machine or dishwasher, humidifiers, improperly vented appliances, or maintenance or repairs that have yet to be addressed.

## CAN MOLD AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Mold rarely affects healthy people. In fact, we are exposed to molds and spores every day. If mold is growing on a surface, spores may spread into the air where they can be inhaled. We can also ingest (eat) spores. Some people who ingest or inhale a large number of spores may have health effects. For example, naturally occurring molds in outside air are associated with allergies in some adults and children, often producing symptoms like hay fever. Hay fever-like reactions are common and include:

- » Respiratory problems like wheezing, difficulty breathing, and shortness of breath, especially in individuals with chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma
- » Nasal and sinus congestion
- » Eye irritation (burning, watery, or reddened eyes)
- » Dry cough
- » Nose or throat irritation
- » Skin rashes

In very rare and extreme cases, some people report headaches, memory problems, mood swings, nosebleeds, body aches and pains, and fevers.

Also, some people are more sensitive to molds than others, including:

- » Infants and children
- » Elderly people
- » Immune compromised patients (such as people with HIV infection, cancer, liver disease, or those receiving chemotherapy)
- » Individuals with existing respiratory conditions, such as allergies and asthma

If you think you have a health problem caused by mold in your home, contact your medical provider.

# What You Should Know About Mold, *cont.*

## HOW DO I DISCOVER IF I HAVE A MOLD PROBLEM IN MY HOUSE?

Look around! The most practical way to find a mold problem is by using your eyes to look for mold growth and by using your nose to locate the source of suspicious odors. Mold often appears as discoloration, staining, or fuzzy growth on the surface of building materials or furnishings. If you see what you think is mold (appears cottony, velvety, granular, or leathery; has varied colors of white, gray, brown, black, yellow, green) or if there is an earthy or musty smell, you should assume that a potential mold problem exists.

## HOW CAN I PREVENT MOLD IN MY HOUSE?

Some routine measures will help prevent mold growth in your home. The most effective step is to eliminate the source of water because mold must have water to grow. Mold growth is almost always associated with moisture, water leaks, or elevated humidity levels. Here are some things you can do to keep mold from growing:

1. Report any water problems or leaks by submitting a service request. These should be repaired as soon as possible.
2. Keep indoor humidity levels low (30-60% is ideal) by venting bathrooms, dryers, and other moisture-generating sources to the outside; using air conditioners and dehumidifiers; increasing seasonal cross-flow ventilation by opening windows and doors periodically; and using exhaust fans when cooking, dishwashing, and bathing.
3. Don't place carpeting in areas that are likely to be damp (bathrooms, garages, or foyers).
4. Dry out wet areas as soon as possible, but at least within 48 hours, to prevent significant mold growth.
5. For routine housekeeping, clean small amounts of suspect mold on hard surfaces using soap and water. Wear rubber gloves and scrub the affected area with the soapy water until clean. Rinse with clean water. Let the treated area dry naturally overnight.
  - » Do not use ammonia cleaners.
  - » Do not clean up mold if you have been diagnosed with mold allergies or sensitivities.
  - » Do not clean large areas of mold.

If the suspect mold comes back in a week or two, either the area is still getting wet, all of the material wasn't cleaned off or there is some other reason for re-occurrence. At this point, it is important to call in a Service Request.

## WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Anyone experiencing hay fever-like symptoms or who has been medically diagnosed with allergies may want to:

- » Use allergen resistant covers for mattresses and pillows.
- » Clean your house with a HEPA-filtered vacuum cleaner. This will minimize allergens released to the air during cleaning.
- » Periodically change the air filters for your air conditioner and indoor ventilation system as directed by GLMCs.

Do not worry about having your house tested for mold. In almost every situation, visible mold can be successfully removed without testing.

## WHO SHOULD I CALL IF I SUSPECT A MOLD PROBLEM IN MY BASE HOUSE?

In order to combat the musty odor and the growth of mold, one should submit a Service Request as soon as it is visually noticed or the odor is detected.

### *What to report to the Balfour Beatty Communities Management Office:*

1. Any leak or water damage
2. Any malfunctioning in your heating, ventilation, or air conditioning system
3. Windows or doors that don't open or close properly
4. Any areas of visible mold (except very small areas that respond to routine cleaning)
5. Musty or moldy odors
6. Health issues which you think are linked to the air quality within your home

### *For More Information on Mold:*

EPA's Mold, Moisture & Your Home  
<http://www.epa.gov/mold/moldguide.html>

CDC's Mold in the Environment  
<http://www.cdc.gov/mold/faqs.htm>