



## **Mold: Fact Sheet**

### **What is mold?**

Molds produce tiny, almost invisible spores that float through the air<sup>1</sup>. Molds are present everywhere- indoors and outdoors. They serve an important, positive role by helping to break down organic matter. At least 1,000 species of molds are common in the United States. Mold starts to grow once it lands on a damp or wet surface. Mold needs water and moisture to grow, so it is important to keep our homes dry in order to control mold growth. Mold can grow on a variety of surfaces, including sheetrock, plaster, wood, paper, clothing, carpet, and other surfaces that are kept wet.

### **Where does it grow?**

All molds need water to grow. Molds can grow anywhere there is water damage, high humidity, and dampness. Mold is most commonly found in bathrooms, kitchens, basements, and near areas with chronic leaking (pipes, roofs, and radiators). "Mold growths are often a problem after a flood – either from sewage, a bad leak or very wet weather conditions"<sup>2</sup>. Although small amounts of mold growth are not extremely dangerous to our health, it should be cleaned up immediately. There are many different types of mold, some more dangerous than others. For example, mildew is a common kind of mold. However, *Stachybotrys Chartarum* (SC), a greenish-black mold (that typically grows on materials such as drywall, sheetrock, ceiling tiles, and wood) is considered highly toxic to humans and can cause serious lung problems. SC can be positively identified through a microscopic exam or by specially trained professionals.

### **What are the health effects of mold exposure?**

According to medical experts, mold does have the potential to cause health problems, especially for young children, the elderly, and people with respiratory illnesses. Molds produce allergens (substances that can cause allergic reactions) and in some cases, potentially toxic substances (mycotoxins). Health effects linked to mold exposure include memory loss, sinus congestion, eye irritation, chronic fatigue, fever, sneezing, itching, respiratory problems, and rashes. Mold can also trigger asthma attacks. Some people have different levels of sensitivity to mold and for this reason it is difficult to categorize the effects of mold on healthy humans in a standard fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement from MET Council Mold Fact Sheet, <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Cited from MET Council Mold Fact Sheet, <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>

## How to safely clean mold?

The key to mold control is moisture control. It is most important to fix the source of the water problem, or the mold will return. To prevent mold growth, you must dry the water-damaged area immediately. The mold spores will not grow if moisture is not present. If you clean the mold, but don't fix the water problem, then most likely, the mold problem will come back. Mold can grow fast, so it's best not to wait. Fix the plumbing leaks and other water problems as soon as possible.

"According to the NYC Dept of Health, mold should be cleaned by scrubbing the mold away with a mixture of chlorine bleach, soap and water. Be sure to keep small children, pregnant women, elderly and sick people away from the affected area during the clean-up process. Protect yourself by wearing rubber gloves, goggles, long sleeves and pants, and closed-toed shoes. Discard the cleaning cloth and damaged materials such as carpets, curtains, furniture, paper, wall paper, plaster or sheet rock after clean-up is complete. The cleaning cloths should be discarded, and any thing that had the mold growing on it, such as carpets, curtains, furniture, paper, wall paper, plaster or sheet rock should also be discarded. **The city's health department has clear guidelines for cleaning up mold growths which should be followed. If your landlord is doing the cleanup, make sure his workers follow the guidelines.** Obviously, very large growths should be handled by a trained contractor hired by the landlord"<sup>3</sup>.

The mold should be completely removed. There should be no visible mold or musty odors. Revisit the site shortly after clean up to be sure that the mold doesn't return. Increasing the ventilation (running a fan or opening a window) and cleaning more frequently will usually prevent mold from recurring or at least keep it to a minimum.

## What is the landlord's responsibility?<sup>4</sup>

In New York City, tenants have had difficulties getting landlords to effectively abate mold problems. However, thanks to the liability issues, larger and well-insured landlords are more responsive than they once were to complaints about mold. The city's housing department will record mold growths as "C" class, or immediately hazardous violations. However, tenants continue to report that both the health and the housing departments are not very effective in forcing resistant landlords to both clean up mold growths and to keep the growth away. Tenants in some of New York City's newer buildings have had severe mold problems either because of carelessly maintained air conditioning/heating duct work or because of uncorrected leaks. Tenants in Phipps Plaza and Hudson Piers, two post-WWII complexes, have complained and sued over very serious mold conditions.

**Before any cleaning work is done the leak has to be stopped which is, of course, the landlord's responsibility. If the surface being cleaned is going to get wet again, the cleaning will fail to solve the problem. The underlying leak might be leaky risers, roof leaks, outer wall leaks (which require pointing) or have other causes. To be effective, the underlying cause must be identified and fixed.** According to government information, once the area is kept consistently dry, the mold problem will go away quickly. Call your landlord and ask her to clear up the problem. If this fails to get immediate action, follow the steps you would take with any serious repair problem:

To report a mold problem in your apartment or common building areas, call the NYC Dept of Health at 311 (or directly to the DOH's Office of Environmental Investigations at 212/442-3372.) You should also report mold and

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<sup>3</sup> Cited from MET Council Mold Fact Sheet, <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Entire section originally cited from Statement from MET Council Mold Fact Sheet, <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>

any chronic leaks from pipes, improperly working drains, or roof leaks, to the NYC Dept. Of Housing, Preservation and Development, Central Complaint at 311.

You should treat mold as you would any serious repair problem. Write a letter to the landlord describing the problem and the steps you have taken to get the problem fixed. (In other words, if you spoke to the super and showed him the mold, include that in your letter.) Be sure to date the letter, keep a copy and send it to the landlord either by certified mail or with a receipt of mailing. You can include the letter with the rent check if it is close to the time you are paying the rent. Share with the landlord information about mold (see below) so the clean up is properly done.

If the landlord fails to act promptly, you can take the landlord to court in an HP Action, file a complaint with the DHCR (complain about reduction in services and ask for a rent reduction – get the forms by calling 718-739-6400 or at [www.dhcr.state.ny.us](http://www.dhcr.state.ny.us)) and/or continue filing complaints by phone with both the city’s housing department and health department. Get advice from Met Council or another housing group if you want to take the landlord to court. Take pictures of the mold and the leak condition. If the mold growth was caused by the landlord’s negligence, and has made part of your apartment unusable, or destroyed your personal property you might be able to get an abatement on the rent or money from small claims court for your destroyed belongings. If you hire a mold specialist to inspect your apartment or to do abatement work, keep all the receipts. If you or other household members feel that the mold is affecting your health, seek medical help and keep a record of what the doctor says and any medical bills you have to pay because of the problem. You might be able to get compensated for your expenses by negotiating with the landlord (or suing if that fails).

### **Organize!**

“You should contact other tenants in the building if you think the problem is building-wide and get them involved in as a group to pressure the landlord. Keep in mind that the landlord’s insurance company will want to know about these problems as well. Use local media if the landlord is not being responsible about clean up. If the problem is severe, contact local elected officials and get their help in extracting effective help from the city’s agencies”.<sup>5</sup> Contact WE ACT or a local housing group for help in organizing against a landlord who refuses to clean up.

### **For More Information about Mold**

**The information and advice from this fact sheet was primarily collected from Met Council\* and from the following agencies – contact them for more information or assistance:**

- Call the **Our Housing is Our Health Hotline** (212-961-1000, ext 322) for more information.
- **\*MET Council:** 339 Lafayette Street, #301, New York, NY 10012 at 212 979-6238 or [active@metcouncil.net](mailto:active@metcouncil.net), <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>
- **The New York City Department of Health** can provide information about the health effects of mold exposure and information about the safe removal of mold.
- New York City Department of Health, Office of Environmental Investigations at (212) 442-3372 or the Environmental and Occupational Disease Epidemiology Unit at (212) 788-4290.
- There is information about mold, how to remove it, and how to deal with some of the health effects on the website: <http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/doh/html/epi/epimold.html>
- **The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** has information on its website about mold and clean up procedures as well as links to information about mold and asthma and other environmental issues: <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/>

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<sup>5</sup> Statement from MET Council Mold Fact Sheet, <http://www.metcouncil.net/factsheets/mold.htm>

- **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health** has information about mold and health in homes and work places: <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/airpollution/mold/default.htm>
- **The National Institutes of Health's Medline** provides web access to articles on various types of health issues related to mold: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/molds.html>

WE ACT for Environmental Justice ~Our Housing Is Our Health Campaign  
271 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 308, New York, NY 10027  
212-961-1000 ext.319 Fax:212-961-1015 E-mail:[julien@weact.org](mailto:julien@weact.org)  
**"Your Housing Should Not Make You Sick"**