

PUBLIC HEALTH | INFORMATION SERIES

Mold-Specific Concerns Associated with Water Damage for Those with Allergies, Asthma, and Other Lung Diseases



After natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods, excess moisture and standing water may contribute to the growth of mold and other microbial contaminants in homes and other buildings. Sewage contamination increases these risks. When returning to a home that has been flooded, be aware that mold may be present and may be a health risk for you or your family.

Q: How do I know if my home has mold?

Often, mold can be seen and smelled. If you answer yes to one of the following questions, your home may have excess mold:

1. Do the walls and/or ceiling show signs of visible mold growth or water damage?
2. Do you smell a bad odor, such as a musty, earthy smell or a foul stench?

Note that mold may not always be seen or smelled, and will require testing to detect. Testing should be done by a certified industrial hygienist (CIH). A list of qualified CIH professional is available on the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) website at: <https://www.aiha.org/public-resources> or through your local health department.

If you do choose to hire a CIH to conduct testing for mold, you may wish to ask the following questions:

1. What services do you provide?
2. What is your timeline from inspection to final report?
3. What fees do you charge?
4. What does your scope of work include or exclude?
5. Which lab do you use and is it AIHA accredited?
6. How many projects of this nature have you performed?

There are also home kits available to test for mold, but more research is needed to determine the accuracy of these kits.

Top Health Considerations for Entering a Flooded Home

1. Electricity and gas should be turned off immediately to avoid shock and gas leak. (For information on how to do this, go to http://www.redcross.org/images/MEDIA_CustomProductCatalog/m4540081_repairingFloodedHome.pdf).
2. Consider all mud and water that has entered the home to be contaminated. Wear personal protective equipment (preferably N95 mask or other approved respirator, gloves, goggles) as you re-enter the area and until cleanup is complete.
3. Soiled or saturated porous materials such as carpets, carpet pads, and furniture should be discarded to prevent mold and other microbial growth.
4. Solid materials can be cleaned with water and detergent. Use extreme caution if using bleach. Read labels on household cleaners and avoid mixing them together.
5. If you know or suspect your home contains lead or asbestos, do not attempt remediation without first calling 1-800-424-LEAD or the EPA TSCA Assistance Service at 202-554-1404 for asbestos.
6. Become aware of conditions that would place you at increased risk of adverse health effects should you come into contact with contaminated water (pregnancy, chronic lung diseases such as asthma and emphysema, older age, immunocompromised state).
7. Know who to contact should you develop symptoms consistent with mold exposure (e.g., cough, shortness of breath, fevers). This may include your primary care provider or local health department.



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Q: Why should people with allergies or lung problems avoid mold?

People with asthma, allergies, or other respiratory conditions may be more sensitive to mold. People with immune suppression (such as people with HIV infection, cancer patients taking chemotherapy, patients on immunosuppressive medications, and people who have received an organ transplant) are more susceptible to fungal infections. Therefore, if you are allergic to mold or have asthma, being around mold may make your condition worse. ***If you have a chronic lung condition or a weakened immune system, you could develop fungal infections in your lungs, and you should try to avoid buildings contaminated with mold. Even if you do not have underlying allergies or lung problems, exposure to mold can result in respiratory symptoms and lung conditions.***

Q: What are the symptoms of mold sensitivity?

Symptoms of mold sensitivity can occur early or late following exposure. Early symptoms (within hours of exposure) include stuffy nose, irritated eyes, or skin irritation. Shortness of breath, cough, and wheezing can also occur quickly and may be more likely to occur in people with a history of asthma or emphysema (COPD). Late symptoms (days to weeks following exposure) may include signs of infection including fever, productive cough, shortness of breath and weight loss. If you or your family members have health problems after exposure to mold, contact your healthcare provider.

Q: How do I prevent mold growth?

Controlling moisture in your home is the most critical factor for preventing mold growth. Clean up and dry out your home as quickly as possible using these steps:

- Open doors and windows.
- Use fans, air conditioning units, and dehumidifiers (if available).
- Clean wet items and surfaces with detergent and water.
- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed and disinfected (such as mattresses, carpeting, carpet pads, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings, and most paper products).
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters.
- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks, and other plumbing fixtures) with hot water and laundry or dish detergent.



Q: How do I protect myself while cleaning up mold?

- Buy an N95 mask or other respirator at your local home supply store and wear it. If available, wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles (protective eyewear).
- Mark the area clearly to alert other people that the area may be contaminated.
- After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and warm water.
- If you have a chronic lung condition or weakened immune system it is best to enlist others to help clean up as you should avoid exposure to mold.
- Never mix bleach with ammonia or other household cleaners. Mixing bleach with ammonia or other cleaning products may produce dangerous, toxic fumes.
- Always read the labels and use cleaning products carefully.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.

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For More Information

American Thoracic Society (ATS)

- <https://www.thoracic.org/patients>

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)

- <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/floods/cleanupwater.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/mold/>

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- <https://www.epa.gov/mold/ten-things-you-should-know-about-mold>

American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA)

- <https://www.aiha.org/public-resources>

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