

Not the Same Mold Story

By Mark Weinberger

It wasn't the usual morning drive to work several months ago when I tuned in to the one of those yuck-it-up to wake you up radio talk shows. It was my profession's turn to take a pie in the face that day. No matter; attorneys, politicians, and fashion models have had their turn – today it was ours. I do mold remediation.

So what is all this hype and hysteria about mold? A few years ago, we didn't hear anything about this stuff beyond it being a food wasting nuisance, and now it's making headlines. Black mold, killer mold, and toxic mold, are just a few of the terms found in the media lately. Are these words intended to scare us or get our attention? What we really need is a level headed approach to mold. Here are a few typical questions and answers to do just that.

Q: Mold has been around as long as we have, it's even referenced in the Bible, so why is it such a problem now?

A: That's true. Mold has been around for all of these years. However, the reason we are hearing about it now has to do with changes in our building materials and building techniques. Since the energy crisis, we have learned to build "tighter", more energy efficient buildings. Unwanted moisture from plumbing leaks, openings or overflows can become trapped in walls, closets or cabinets along with the heated or conditioned air we want. When this trapped moisture finds a food source such as paper on drywall, wood or even dust or dirt, mold spores have everything they need to start growing. This can happen in the first 24 to 48 hours.

Q: Mold is everywhere indoors and out. Why is it a problem?

A: It is true. Mold is an essential part of nature. Vegetation would not decay into nutrients for new growth without it, various foods, beverages and types of medication would not exist. However, active mold growth or a high spore counts beyond the normal background amount can be a problem. Of the 100,000 or so types of mold that have been identified, only about 1/10 of that produce micro-toxins that may be harmful to some people.

Q: Is Black mold the same as Toxic Mold?

A: It is important to note that molds can not be identified by the naked eye or by color alone. A qualified industrial hygienist can usually identify mold samples by either viewing them under a microscope or after growing a culture. Not all black molds are toxic, nor are all toxic molds black. An Industrial Hygienist can provide testing.

Q: When is mold remediation necessary?

A: Mold remediation is usually necessary when mold is actively growing or the amount of indoor mold exceeds the background level. An industrial hygienist's report is the surest way to determine if either of these conditions exist. In addition to recommending whether a mold remediation is necessary, a thorough report will also provide a protocol. The protocol may include information on the location of the contamination and the methods the IH wants followed.

Q: Basically, what is a Mold Remediation?

A: Basically, a mold remediation is not an attempt to kill mold, but more accurately an attempt to remove it. Mold remediation should include steps to isolate the contamination and prevent spreading it to unaffected areas of the home or building. This is achieved through setting up plastic barriers, managing air flow and pressure differentials between the contaminated and uncontaminated areas. It should then focus on removal of mold by disposing unsalvageable contaminated building materials like drywall and insulation, then, hepa vacuuming, scraping or sanding the remaining structure. Lastly, a good cleaning of the remaining structure is done. Fungicides are sometimes used only after removal and cleaning as protection from a reoccurrence of mold growth. Maintaining safe levels of moisture throughout the process is also essential.

Q: Since I can't see the mold, how do I know if the mold remediation was successful?

A: Clearance testing by a qualified industrial hygienist is really the only way to know if the job was done successfully. The hygienist will issue written documentation confirming that safe levels were achieved and what those levels were at the time of testing. Be sure that your contractor agrees that the job is not complete until it passes clearance testing and that he is prepared to stick with the job until done.

Q: How much should I expect to pay if I need mold remediation?

A: The absolute best way to control the cost of mold remediation is to avoid or mitigate water damage. Have a plumber check plumbing fixtures such as water heaters, toilets, angle stops, supply lines, pressure regulator, washing machine hoses and refrigerator supply lines. He can suggest preventive maintenance measures (learn more here: http://www.security-plumbing.com/resources/maintain_sched.html) that can prevent release of water in you home. If there is a water intrusion in your home, get an IICRC certified water damage firm on the job as soon as possible to mitigate the damage. The longer you wait, the further and deeper water will saturate into the structure and the longer it will take to dry out. Remember, mold can start to grow in the first 24 to 48 hours, so act responsibly.

The cost of the job obviously depends on the extent of contamination. Remember, the total job will include the cost of testing, remediation, and finally structural repairs. It is a good idea to have a contractor provide the remediation and/or the repairs depending on

the bid, but keep the testing with a separate entity to maintain objectivity. As with any home improvement project, get enough bids until you are comfortable.

Q: How should I choose a mold remediator?

A: As with any home improvement project over \$500, you should use a licensed contractor. The California State Licensed Contractor's Board maintains a web site so you can check to see that the license is in good standing. It's also a good idea to see that the contractor is certified by one of the various agencies involved with indoor air quality. A list of websites is listed at the end of this article. The Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration IICRC has compiled standards for mold remediation and water damage restoration. Ask the potential contractor if he is familiar with these standards and is a certified mold remediator.

To learn more about these indoor air quality issues visit the following websites:

American Board of Industrial Hygiene @ www.abib.org

Indoor Air Quality Association, Inc. @ www.iaqa.org

American Industrial Hygiene Association @ www.aiha.org

American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists @ www.acgih.org

United States Environmental Protection Agency @ <http://www.epa.gov>

New York City Department of Health @ <http://www.ci/nyc/ny/us/html/doh>

State of California Department of Health Services @ <http://www.dhs.cahwnet.gov>

American Lung Association @ <http://www.lungusa.org>

Federal Emergency Management Agency @ <http://www.fema.gov>

Indoor Air Quality Information Site @ <http://www.aeris.org>