

# Employer has responsibility to ensure workplace safe from mould

Common symptoms of overexposure are congestion, runny nose, eye irritation and aggravation of asthma

By Nancy Keller

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Mould (fungi) is present everywhere — indoors and outdoors.

There are more than 100,000 species of mould. At least 1,000 are commonly found including tetracosporium, penicillium, and aspergillus.

Mould is most likely to grow where there is water or dampness — such as in bathrooms and basements.

In workplaces, workers may be exposed to mould on water-damaged building materials inside buildings, and during building maintenance and repair operations.

Buildings with a history of water leaks, floods, fires and problems with indoor air Quality (e.g. poor humidity control, lack of fresh air) should be considered at greater risk of mould growth.

Water-damaged drywall, wood

materials, wallpaper, and cardboard are prone to fungal growth.

Most types of mould encountered are not hazardous to healthy individuals. However, too much exposure may cause or worsen asthma, hay fever or other allergies.

The most common symptoms of overexposure are cough, congestion, runny nose, eye irritation and aggravation of asthma.

Depending on the amount of exposure and a person's individual vulnerability, more serious health effects such as fevers and breathing problems can occur but are uncommon.

Some types of mould can cause more serious health problems, but that is much more rare.

When mouldy material becomes damaged or disturbed, spores (reproductive bodies similar to seeds) can be released into the air.

Exposure can occur if people inhale spores, directly handle mouldy material or accidentally ingest it.

Mould can sometimes produce chemicals called mycotoxins, which may cause illness in people who are sensitive to them or if they are exposed to large amounts in the air.

Large exposures are typically associated with certain occupations such as agricultural work.

Although any visible mould can be sampled by an environmental consultant and/or analyzed by a laboratory specializing in microbiology, these tests can be very expensive — from hundreds to thousands of dollars.

There is no simple and cheap way to sample the air in your home or workplace to find out what types of mould are present and if they are airborne.

Even if you have your home or workplace tested, it is difficult to say at what levels health effects would occur. Therefore, it is more important to get rid of the mould rather.

The most effective way to treat mould is to correct underlying water damage and clean the affected area.

Mould should be cleaned as soon as it appears. Persons cleaning mould should be free of symptoms

and allergies.

Small areas of mould should be cleaned using a detergent/soapy solution or an appropriate household cleaner. Gloves should be worn during cleaning. The cleaned area should then be thoroughly dried. Dispose of any sponges or rags used to clean mould.

If the mould returns quickly or spreads, it may indicate an underlying problem such as a leak. Any underlying water problems must be fixed to successfully eliminate mould problems.

If mould contamination is extensive, a professional abatement company may need to be consulted.

Moisture problems (flooding, leaks, water intrusion, condensation, etc.) in buildings are the primary reason for mould growth.

These moisture problems should be the focus of assessment and control efforts, followed by clean-up, remediation of contaminated materials, periodic inspections, and preventive and remedial maintenance.

If mould contamination is extensive, the employer should seek professional assistance from private sector consultants who specialize in mould and mould remediation.

Employers are required by section 25(2)(h) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act places a responsibility on constructors (section 23), employers (section 25), and supervisors (section 27) to ensure the health and safety of workers.

This includes protecting workers from mould in workplace buildings. Various sections of the Industrial, Construction, Mining or Health Care regulations may also apply to maintenance and remediation activities.

Call the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers — Sudbury by phoning 523-2330.

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