

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About MOLD

**but were afraid to ask*

By Diane Feen

THE BEST PART ABOUT LIVING IN SOUTH FLORIDA IS THE WEATHER. COMBINE THAT WITH OUR BEAUTIFUL WATERWAYS AND MOIST CLIMATE AND YOU HAVE UTOPIA. YOU ALSO HAVE THE PERFECT BREEDING GROUND FOR MOLD.

If you think that mold is something only found in dilapidated buildings and abandoned homes, think again. Experts and air quality specialists have declared our ideal climate the ideal environment for mold to flourish.

"Most houses in South Florida have had some form of water intrusion. We have found that the levels of mold have jumped ten-fold in the past two years because of all the storms. In the past we didn't see much stachybotrys, but now the levels are off the charts," said David Leshner, owner of Mold Detection Services.

If you are familiar with stachybotrys mold, you know the danger it poses. Exposure to it can cause throat irritation, upper respiratory problems, malaise, memory loss, skin irritation and corneal infections. It can also wreak havoc with your life.

"I moved into an apartment in Boca Raton and after two weeks I developed a bad cough. This led to what seemed like pneumonia, but I didn't suspect mold contamination because I couldn't see it. After four weeks my breathing was so bad I had to move out of the apartment," said Susan, a Boca Raton teacher.

Susan's story was nothing compared to that of Texas publicist Melinda Ballard. Ballard's 22-room mansion had leaky pipes that caused stachybotrys mold to grow. Her husband

Ron Allison and their 5-year-old son Reese now suffer from neurological damage caused by exposure to this deadly toxin. A Texas jury eventually awarded them \$32 million in restitution.

The key to avoiding these nightmare scenarios is to educate yourself to the ways and means of mold. The pros are very outspoken that mold can, and will, grow anywhere there is moisture. And trying to eliminate moisture in the South Florida heat is like trying to catch a rainbow.

"Mold is very common in homes and buildings and will grow anywhere there is moisture. There is no practical way to eliminate all mold and mold spores in the indoor environment; the only way to control it is to control moisture. It becomes problematic when moisture sources are undiscovered or un-addressed," said Alon Levin, Vice President of Decon Environmental in Fort Lauderdale.

That's why it is important to call in an air quality specialist to count and clarify the air you breathe. But before you do that it's vital that you do your homework. That means checking their qualifications and backgrounds to find out, in particular, if they are members of the National Association of Mold Professionals, trained in mold remediation, and how many years they have been doing this work.

According to Anthony Scirpoli of Bio-Science Environmental Services in Boca Raton, "there are a lot of renegades in this business and you have to make sure they have an established business. I would also ask for references; if they don't give them to you don't do business with them. It's a lot like picking a mechanic."

That's because there is no professional license necessary to practice mold remediation in Florida. Plumbers, home inspectors, contractors (or anyone for that matter) can call themselves a mold expert, but often times they are not properly trained.

"There are no nationwide standards or guidelines for environmental testing, remediation techniques, contractor qualifications, worker training and protective equipment. As a result, this area is susceptible to unscrupulous or uninformed service providers. Congress is currently working on mold-related legislation in at least 20 states," said Burton T. Fried, CEO of New York City-based LVI Services, an environmental remediation firm.

The three telltale signs of mold are a musty smell, signs of water intrusion and possible health problems. If you have any of these symptoms or premonitions, call an indoor air quality specialist immediately. Scirpoli suggests making sure your air quality specialist takes air samples, swab samples, moisture readings and, if necessary, a pro vision scope should be used to find hidden mold.

The reason mold is so insidious is that it can grow behind walls, and like an experienced burglar, it often leaves no clues. That's why Leshner's business has grown by leaps and bounds in the last two years. His mold-sniffing dogs have proven to be the quintessential detectors of hidden toxic indoor mold. "The dogs walk around a room and point their noses where the source of mold is. Then we put a tube

through a wall socket to trap the spores so they can be sent to a lab and analyzed," said Leshner.

This relatively new form of canine mold inspection was the brainchild of Bill Whitstine. He discovered that certain breeds of dogs (Labradors, Terriers and Beagles) can effectively sniff out mold the same way they do drugs or bombs. The dogs are trained to sniff up to 18 different types of toxic mold. One thing Leshner does advise, however, is to avoid letting anyone cut a hole in the wall to look for mold spores. "This can release the spores," he said.

If you find out your indoor air contains elevated levels of toxic or allergenic mold spores you will need to have the environment air scrubbed. This is done with a large machine



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that sucks the air in and catches the mold spores in a HEPA filter. If the wall is moist and mold-infested you don't have that option.

"Mold-infested drywall must be cut out and discarded. Fiberboard furniture or cabinets infested with mold should also be thrown away. You should also clean your air conditioner, or have a professional do it, since they frequently harbor mold microbes," said Dwayne Monaco, operations manager at Northeast Environmental, Inc. Leshner also advises making sure the area being cleaned or removed is properly contained so mold spores don't spread throughout the house.

Monaco also advises repairing all chronic moisture sources like cracked pipes or a leaky roof. "After any flooding from a broken pipe or a severe storm you should dry the wet area, clean the carpet and wash down walls and floors with a diluted bleach solution. Use an air conditioner or dehumidifier during humid weather and install ventilation fans in bathrooms, kitchens and other high-moisture areas."

It is also important to make sure the company that performs the inspection and testing is different than the remediation company. "This will eliminate ethical conflicts of interest and allow the consumer to be sure unnecessary work is not being quoted. All post-mold tests should be performed by an independent company not affiliated with the remediation company to insure the mold cleanup was performed properly," adds Leshner. ❖

