



COLORADO REAL ESTATE JOURNAL

THE COMMUNICATION CHANNEL OF THE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE COMMUNITY

MARCH 19, 2014 – APRIL 1, 2014

Mold: what property owners need to know to keep building safe

You've probably heard the horror stories: mold growing rampant in a commercial building, hotel, hospital, or home; making people sick; and requiring extensive – and expensive – remediation.

But is mold really something that every property owner needs to worry about?

What is mold?

Molds are fungi that can grow indoors as well as outdoors. They flourish in warm, wet environments and spread by releasing microscopic cells, called spores, into the air.

Breathing in mold spores – and the mycotoxins they contain – can make some people sick, especially those with pre-existing respiratory illnesses, such as asthma, and mold allergies. Nasal stuffiness, eye irritation, wheezing, skin irritation, as well as more severe reactions, such as fever, shortness of breath, and mold infections of the lung, can occur.

The Institute of Medicine has weighed in on the issue, affirming that there is sufficient evidence to link indoor exposure to mold with upper respiratory tract symptoms in otherwise healthy people. The IOM and the World Health Organization have also cautioned that mold may cause respiratory illness, including asthma, in otherwise healthy children.

■ Do you have mold? So, is mold lurking inside your building? Mold can grow on virtually any surface, anywhere that moisture, oxygen and mold food exist. Molds eat common building materials, such as plywood, drywall and carpeting.



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They also can survive on dust containing skin cells and dust mites.

Yes, your building almost certainly contains some mold. While it's impossible to eliminate all mold

and mold spores, mold growth can be controlled by controlling moisture.

■ Preventing mold problems. To prevent mold problems, prevent or quickly fix moisture problems:

- Repair leaky plumbing and clean up wet spots immediately.
- Continually watch for condensation and wet spots. Fix the causes right away.
- Insulate to prevent condensation.
- Dehumidify (keep indoor humidity below 60 percent) and optimize air circulation.
- Don't let foundations stay wet. Fix grading if this is a problem.
- Monitor roof surfaces and penetrations for leak paths.

■ Finding and identifying mold. There are thought to be tens of thousands of mold species. All of them release spores to reproduce; therefore, all molds can cause respiratory problems.

Mold on visible surfaces is easy to spot. Regular and thorough inspections of your building (including attic spaces, closets, basements, etc.) will quickly reveal visible mold

problems. Hidden mold, on the other hand, is trickier to find. Mold can grow behind drywall, on the backside of wallpaper, above ceiling tiles, below carpet, inside pipe chases and ductwork – anywhere moisture can accumulate.

Moreover, mold is capable of growing while moisture exists and then becoming dormant when moisture dries up. In these cases, when moisture is reintroduced into an area with dormant mold, you may see what seems like a sudden and large mold colony.

You should be suspicious of hidden mold if an area smells moldy even though no mold is visible. Likewise, if an area has sustained water damage, mold could be growing unseen. If building occupants are reporting respiratory health problems, you must also consider mold as a possible culprit.

Investigating possible hidden mold problems can be dangerous. As with asbestos, disturbing moldy surfaces can release millions of unwanted particles into the air, exacerbating health problems. An experienced inspector knows how to safely search for mold and will also provide remediation recommendations.

■ Mold inspections. A professional inspector will conduct a careful and detailed visual inspection for mold. Signs of water damage and moldy odors also provide clues. Sometimes the inspector may need to move furniture, check below carpeting, inspect ductwork interiors and view other usually hidden surfaces to find the location and determine the extent of the

problem.

Air, surface or bulk sampling may sometimes also be necessary to determine spore concentration in the air or identify the mold species present. Sampling must be performed in accordance with Environmental Protection Agency recommendations and Occupational Safety and Health Administration, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and American Industrial Hygiene Association guidelines.

■ Mold remediation. Removing small mold colonies (up to about 10 square feet) often can be accomplished with sunlight, ventilation, standard cleaners, dehumidifiers and other simple remedies. Killing the mold is not enough, however, because the chemicals and proteins that cause respiratory problems are still present in dead mold. Those removing the mold must wear respirators with P-100 filters as well as protective clothing and gloves.

Remediating significant mold growth may require professional mold remediation and may involve more drastic steps, such as dry ice blasting and the removal of affected building materials. Only personnel trained in hazardous materials removal and equipped with proper safety gear should undertake this dangerous task.

References: CDPHE, www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/CDPHE-AP/CBON/1251594846206; EPA, www.epa.gov/mold/; CDC, www.cdc.gov/mold/; and WHO, www.truthaboutmold.info/who.▲