

Zeroing in on Mold

Tips to prevent the potentially hazardous fungus
by Sharise Cunningham

ED McMAHON HAS IT. And so does the environmental crusader Erin Brockovich. But unlike some things in these millionaires' homes, this is something you wouldn't wish for. It's mold—not the kind that grows on your ignored leftovers—but a more invasive variety that secretly builds up behind walls, under floors and in other moist areas of your home. When left untreated, this often hidden mold can be toxic and can cause a variety of problems ranging from health-related issues to structural damage to your home.



Cladosporium Aspergillus

Photos courtesy of ShovelBuck.com Inc.

Types of Mold

Molds are fungi, microscopic organisms that are found indoors and out. The most common household molds are *Alternaria*, *Aspergillus*, *Cladosporium*, *Mucor* and *Penicillium*. *Stachybotrys* and *Memmoniella*, however, are two species of toxic black molds found in homes, and *Stachybotrys* is the most common.

How it Can Affect You

Stachybotrys chartarum (*Stachybotrys atra*), or toxic black mold, has been associated with a number of respiratory and central nervous system problems, and

looks like a slimy greenish-black tar. What makes it toxic is the presence of a poisonous substance called mycotoxin.

It's recently been recognized as a hazard because it can cause or aggravate asthma, sinus congestion, headaches, runny nose and eyes, and fatigue. However, more severe symptoms of brain damage and memory loss have not been verified by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

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Chaetomium and Aspergillus



It's this mold that prompted former *Tonight Show* sidekick Ed McMahon to file a \$20 million lawsuit against his insurance company for failing to properly clean up after fixing a broken pipe in his California home. In the suit filed this past April, McMahon contends that the mold from the broken pipe spread throughout his home and killed his dog.

Erin Brockovich—made famous by Julia Roberts in the movie about how she traced illnesses in a California town to groundwater contamination—is now dealing with her own toxic battle as *Stachybotrys* takes up residence in her dream home. Brockovich suffered with unshakable flu-like symptoms for more than a year before an attorney who specializes in toxic mold cases helped her trace her problems to the invasive mold. True to form, Brockovich is fighting by suing the builder, subcontractors and the former owner, claiming faulty construction caused water leaks that led to the mold. In the meantime, she refuses to leave and is fixing her home one room at a time at a cost of \$600,000.

Here in Atlanta, Steve McCoy of Star94 FM called Puritech air-filtration company when his family suffered from constant coughing. McCoy says he also noticed mold growing around the wood on the interior

of their 15-year-old home and had made an annual project of cleaning mold spores off the ceiling beams.

How It Gets In

Molds grow naturally in the indoor environment but can also enter your home through heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, or open doors and windows. Spores can also enter by attaching to clothes, shoes or pets. Active spores are like seeds that breed new mold growths in moist or humid areas created by flooding, leaks and humidifiers, as well as in crawl spaces, basements and other damp areas of the home.

How to Detect It

Hopefully you'll be able to determine whether or not mold is a problem before someone in your home becomes ill or you notice property damage. Following are some key things to look for and do to prevent it:

Check out visible mold growth (may look cottony, velvety, granular, or leathery and appear white, gray, brown, black, yellow, green or fluorescent in color).



Examine all areas of excess moisture or water damage, or areas that have an earthy or musty odor.

Search behind and underneath carpeting, wallpaper, vinyl flooring, sink cabinets, furniture, pictures or among items placed



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near outside walls or on cold floors.

Check around air conditioners and furnaces for stagnant water. Service these units with regular cleaning of ducts and air filters.


Check the ventilation on the clothes dryer to ensure it is properly fitted.



How To Get Rid Of It

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says homeowners can clean small areas under 10 square feet from non-porous surfaces like glass.

To remove infestations from non-porous surfaces (and help prevent future ones), the CDC recommends using a solution of 10 parts water to 1 part bleach. More serious cases, especially infestations on porous surfaces like carpet, Sheetrock and wood, require professional removal or replacement. Call in a remediation company trained in mold removal for these more serious cases. Ultimately, the best way to control mold growth is to control your home's moisture.

After removal, consider investing in an air filtration system and treating surfaces with a mold inhibitor. McCoy agrees. "Not one of us has suffered a cold or flu-like symptoms since we've had the [air filtration] system cleaning the air in our home." 



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