

Breaking the mold hysteria

*Health concerns
don't justify the hype*

BY ERNEST N. CHARLESWORTH

SAN ANGELO, TEXAS - After thousands of years of benign existence, tiny mold spores suddenly are causing big problems across the United States. From stifling home sales to causing worries about alleged health problems, mold has become the latest hot headline and, sadly, a subject of much misinformation.

In fact, the inaccuracies and sensationalism fueling the mold controversy are more dangerous than the actual mold itself. The public is being sent into a panic over a naturally occurring fungus that commonly causes allergies, but has not been scientifically proved to cause serious illness.

Mold is everywhere, and we are exposed to mold spores every minute of the day. You can find mold not only in your home but it's also likely in your office, at the airport and in the hotel where you stayed during your last vacation. It's in your medicine cabinet as penicillin and your refrigerator as beer and cheese. It also shows up routinely in your garden and, probably, your shower stall or bathtub as well.

Yet news stories have driven the public to panic about this prolific fungus.

By playing to public health fears, aggressive personal injury lawyers, mold testing companies, mold remediators, the news media and other opportunists have discovered how to profit from the panic by literally turning mold into gold. The scare-tactics appear to be working.

The effect has been a tremendous jump in mold claims across the country, particularly in states such as Florida and Texas where warm, humid conditions foster mold growth. Perhaps not coincidentally, mold claims seem to be on the rise in states where the legal climate is also known to encourage junk and abusive lawsuits.

Mold is the next profit center for the lawsuit industry — what the breast-implant scare was in the '90s — and the public already is suffering the consequences.

Homeowner's insurance in many states is harder to obtain, is less comprehensive and more expensive. Homes with a prior water claim are becoming more difficult to sell. Mold-related lawsuits are being filed from coast to coast against builders, real estate agents, and apartment managers.

Fear of liability claims is forcing local governments and school districts to spend thousands of dollars to close schools, fire stations and other municipal buildings to remove mold — even though no scientific evidence indicates that such drastic action is necessary.

Experts believe an estimated 70 percent of all homes have mold behind the walls, and it would be difficult to find a home without some evidence of *Stachybotrys*, the so-called "toxic" or "black" mold.

If mold toxins at indoor environmental levels were dangerous, we would all be sick. And, because mold has literally been around for ages, there would be a long history of chronic illness caused by exposure to mold. Such history is non-existent.

According to many experts reporting in the medical literature, inhalation or skin contact with *Stachybotrys* has not been proved to cause verifiable disease in any individual, including those whose immune systems are suppressed such as transplant recipients, patients on chemotherapy and AIDS patients.

While molds can commonly cause allergy symptoms similar to hay fever in some people, no documented cases or scientific evidence definitively links mold exposure to more serious illnesses. Even exposure to toxin-producing molds is not likely to harm humans because the mold spores are not inhaled at high levels of concentration.

Yet the public isn't given these facts. Instead, news media reports feature hysteria-promoting headlines such as "Is your office killing you?" or video clips of moon suit-clad mold removal teams. The public has been driven into a needless panic.

Anyone really worried about possible health problems from mold exposure, should remember that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here are a few easy steps you can take to deal with mold:

- Find and fix water leaks and clean up water from leaks quickly.
- Limit the use of humidifiers.
- Keep up home maintenance.

In short, use common sense. If detected early, most molds can be removed easily with a thorough cleaning using soapy water and a diluted solution containing 10 percent bleach.

If you still have concerns, talk to your doctor or contact your local health department. Don't let mold misinformation and media-generated hysteria make you sick.

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