

# Auckland Regional Public Health Service

Rātonga Hauora ā Iwi o Tamaki Makaurau



Working with the people of Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waitemata

## Public Health Fact Sheet - Mould

### What is mould?

Moulds are fungi that are found almost everywhere, inside and outdoors, year round. Moulds act as nature's decomposers, breaking down organic matter, and can be various colours including white, green, red or black. Moulds reproduce by releasing microscopic spores into the air, which can enter homes through windows, doors, cracks, and vents.

Moulds need moisture to grow. Controlling moisture sources in your home is the most important step you can take to ensure your home remains mould free.

### What are the health effects of mould in the home?

Exposure to mould and mould spores can cause a range of reactions. These include: eye irritation (watery, burning, itchy), runny nose, sneezing, nasal and sinus congestion, sore throat, coughing, wheezing, headaches, and fatigue.

Sensitivity to mould varies from person to person. One person may react severely to levels that cause no symptoms in another person. In general, the following groups are most susceptible to mould:

- infants and children
- the elderly
- immune compromised individuals
- people with allergies
- people with respiratory problems such as asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema

### How do I clean up mould in my home?

Any treatment of mould must begin with stopping the water coming into the area, whether it is from a leak, condensation, excessive humidity, or flooding. If an area is cleaned, but the moisture problem remains, the mould will return. Common sources of indoor moisture include: steam from showers and cooking; wet clothes drying indoors or clothes dryers that are not vented to the outside; flooding; leaky roofs or walls; plumbing leaks; overflow from gutters; overflow from sinks or sewers.

Cleaning will temporarily increase the amount of mould and mould spores in the air. During cleaning, it is best to use disposable rubber gloves, goggles, and a mask - available at your local hardware store. Some moulds may also irritate the skin; so long sleeve shirts and pants are advisable for avoiding direct contact with mould, as well as protecting the person from skin contact with the cleaning agents in use. Make sure the area is well ventilated. Open windows and doors and use fans to create a path of fresh air into the cleanup area - that exits through the nearest opening to the outdoors.

Follow these steps when cleaning mould:

1. Identify and correct the moisture problem.
2. Open windows and doors to allow as much fresh air as possible into the area you are cleaning up.
3. Remove, wrap, and discard non-essential porous material that has been heavily contaminated (i.e., ceiling tiles, leather, cloth, plaster, panelling, wood products, paper, carpet, padding, etc.). Hard material such as glass, plastic, or metal can be kept after cleaning and disinfecting.
4. Prepare a solution of 1.5 cups of household bleach to 4 litres of cold water.
5. Apply solution to the affected area (preferably by spray) and leave for 10 minutes.
6. Rinse the area completely with hot water.

### **Should I hire a professional?**

Cleaning up mould will increase your exposure to mould and bleach fumes. If you have respiratory problems like asthma, chronic bronchitis or emphysema, or the affected area is large, consult a professional.

Having someone test the mould is not usually necessary, and can be expensive. If you can see or smell mould, you probably have a mould problem. Mould may be hidden behind walls, wallpaper, panels, or embedded in porous material. If after cleaning mould, you still notice an odour, you may have hidden mould. You may wish to hire a professional firm when mould is in difficult to reach places, such as in heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems.

### **How can I prevent mould problems from occurring in my home?**

If you have mould growing in your home, it is important you clean it up before you dry out the house, since dry mould is more likely to release spores.

Better ventilation, more heating and higher levels of insulation can prevent the growth of moulds.

Simple measures, such as opening windows during the day to let fresh air into the house and using an extractor fan in the bathroom and kitchen are effective. If you have a rangehood – use the extractor fan option. Close the door when showering, and vent your tumble dryer outside. Allow lots of light to get into your home, by removing trees and shrubs that block light, and opening the curtains during the daylight hours. Heating and insulation increase the capacity of the air to hold moisture and prevent high humidity. Mould cannot grow without high humidity or condensation.

### **Further information**

If the occupants of your house suffer significant health problems - that you think are caused by moulds, we recommend that you visit your GP for a medical assessment. If your doctor thinks your symptoms are related to living in a mouldy home, ask them to refer your case to a Health Protection Officer at Auckland Regional Public Health Service on (09) 623-4600 for general advice, or an Environmental Health Officer (EHO) at your city or district council for advice about the condition of the building.