



Returning to a Moldy Surprise

It Can Literally Make You Sick

by Susan A. Mitchell

Whether you are a snowbird, or simply a vacationer returning to your Florida home, and you notice a musty, earthy type smell, you have likely returned to find a mold problem. Mold is a common problem for homeowners, especially in Florida's warm, humid climate. In the right conditions, mold can begin growing in as little as 48 hours. If left untreated, mold spores can cause indoor air quality problems that result in health issues, especially for those with asthma, allergies, and compromised immune systems. This article describes what mold is, the problems it causes, the steps a homeowner can take to prevent mold growth, and what to do if mold is found upon returning to your home.

What Causes Indoor Mold

Mold is present in nature and our indoor air. In nature, molds serve to break down materials and are found growing in soils, on plants, wood, and other items. Molds produce microscopic cells called spores that travel through the air. When spores land on a suitable surface, they sprout like a seed to form a new mold colony. To grow, mold needs a little moisture and a food source. Many building materials in your home, such as paper, drywall, wood, paint, and wallpaper, provide a suitable food source. Therefore, the key to preventing mold growth is to reduce the moisture in your home.

Why Mold Causes Problems

While research into the possible health effects of mold exposure is ongoing, it is known that exposure to mold can cause nasal, sinus, and throat irritation; allergies; and even infections. According to the Florida Department of Health, people who are sensitive to mold may experience nasal and sinus irritation or congestion, a dry hacking cough, wheezing, skin rashes or burning, watery or red-ened eyes. People with severe allergies to molds may have more serious reactions, such as hay-fever-like symptoms or shortness of breath. People with chronic illnesses or people with immune system problems may be more likely to get infections from certain molds, viruses, and bacteria. Molds can also trigger asthma attacks in persons with asthma. Allergic disease is now considered the most likely health problem related to mold exposures, according to the

Florida Health website, [www.doh.state.fl.us /environment/community/indoor-air/Indoor_Mold_and_Health.pdf](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/community/indoor-air/Indoor_Mold_and_Health.pdf).

Moisture in Your Home

While you are away from your home for extended periods, the following are the most likely reasons why moisture may be an issue:

- Flooding due to storms and heavy rains
- Flooding from indoor sources, such as an air conditioner condensate drain line or pan, an adjacent condominium unit, or broken/leaking plumbing or fire sprinkler pipes
- Condensation caused by indoor humidity that is too high or surfaces that are too cold
- Water leaks from outside the building—roof, walls, or floors

Why Being Away Makes Mold More Likely

When you are away from your home for more than several days, there's always the possibility of a water leak or intrusion going unnoticed and providing a breeding ground for mold. You are probably aware if your property is subject to flooding from major storms or heavy rains. However, severe summer storms can also generate damaging lightning, winds, and hail that can damage the roof, windows, or siding. It's a good idea to stay in touch with neighbors and property management to alert you to any possible storm flooding or exterior damage to your property. Be proactive and let them know the dates you will be away and your contact information.

The more difficult and common issue is a water leak or moisture that isn't apparent from the exterior. Even a small, slow leak can provide enough moisture over several days to promote mold growth. If you were home, you'd likely notice the problem right away—stained drywall or ceiling tiles or water pooling on a floor, for example. Stopping the leak and cleaning/drying up the water right away doesn't give mold time to grow. When you are away, there's plenty of time for mold to grow.

Preventing Water Intrusion

Some absentee homeowners hire someone to check on their property while they are away. Depending on the length of time, age of your home, and other factors, this may be the best solution for peace of mind. However, there are other, less expensive preventative options. First and foremost, make sure your home is properly maintained. Be sure all openings, such as around windows and vents, are properly caulked, gutters and downspouts are clear of debris, and the roof is in good shape, no broken windows, etc. Have your air conditioner properly serviced and maintained.

Know whom to call to prepare your home for a hurricane—installing hurricane shutters or boarding up windows, securing or relocating loose outdoor objects, such as lawn furniture to a secure location, etc. Know what the standard procedure is for entry into and cleanup of

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- There is a lot of water damage, possibly hidden
- Occupants are sensitive to mold spores
- The cleanup involves removal of drywall, ceiling tiles, insulation, carpet, and carpet padding

Like many other states, Florida passed a consumer protection law in 2007 requiring licensing of mold remediation contractors. The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation is responsible for licensure and enforcement of mold assessors and remediators. A grandfathering and initial licensing procedure is currently underway and enforcement will commence on July 1, 2011. The licensing is intended to ensure the contractor is properly trained and has experience doing mold remediation.

The state of Florida has contracted with the American Council for Accredited Certification (ACAC) to provide all of its mold license examinations. Applicants for the Florida Mold Remediator license may take the Council-certified Microbial Remediator (CMR), Council-certified Microbial Remediation Supervisor (CMRS), or Council-certified Indoor Environmental Supervisor (CIES) examinations.

So, in the future, homeowners should check to make sure their contractor is licensed to perform mold remediation services. Until then, make sure your contractor has experience cleaning up mold and that technicians are working under a supervisor who has taken one of the ACAC courses. Check references and ask the contractor to follow the recommendations in EPA's Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings or the guidelines of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH). An unqualified contractor can unknowingly spread the mold spores making a small problem into a larger problem.

While being a snowbird and taking vacations are certainly things that make our lives enjoyable and fun, coming home afterwards to find indoor mold growing isn't. Properly maintaining your home and taking some preventative steps before you leave can minimize the likelihood of mold growth. If you do find mold, clean it up as quickly as possible, either yourself for small areas, or using a reputable and licensed mold remediation contractor to minimize ill health effects.

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