

Mold FAQ

What is a mold?

Mold is a fungus. There are tens of thousands of different species of mold. Mold needs moisture, oxygen, and an organic food source (like wood or dust) to grow. Mold grows best in damp, warm, and dark environments.

How do I know if I have a mold problem?

Mold is a normal part of the outdoor environment. There will always be some mold both outside and inside your house—especially here in the often wet and humid winter seasons. But, if you can see or smell mold in your house, you should clean it.

Can mold make me sick?

Yes! Mold causes allergic reactions in many people—eye or skin irritation, wheezing, nasal stuffiness, and/or coughing. Some people are more sensitive to mold than others. Young children, elderly people, people with immuno-compromised conditions (HIV/AIDS, lupus, etc), and people with severe allergies or asthma should be especially careful to avoid mold. Mold can worsen asthma and allergies. People with obstructive lung disease or other chronic lung problems can develop mold infections in their lungs.

What about “toxic black mold”?

Most molds are not toxic. The most common types of indoor molds in this area (aspergillus, penicillium, cladosporium) do not produce toxins. Many molds are black—don’t be scared just because you see black mold in your house!

However, there are some species of mold that can produce toxins. There may be a link between these molds and health effects like memory loss and severe illness in infants. However, even though “toxic” molds are not common, living in a home with high levels of any kind of mold is not a good idea.

Why can’t I just build on top of the mold?

Mold can eventually rot the wood components of the house and make it structurally unsound. Also, mold eats through drywall paper, so if you build on top of mold, you may end up having to replace your drywall in just a few years. Lastly, living around mold is not healthy. Not cleaning the mold in your house means you and your family can get sick.

How do I kill mold?

The basic idea is to remove the mold, not kill the mold. There are very few chemicals that can kill all the parts of the mold plant, and some of them you would have to apply in concentrations so strong it would be dangerous to use. Also, even dead mold spores can cause irritation and allergic reactions in people, so killing the mold won’t get rid of the health risks.

How do I remove mold?

The first step is to fix any roof or pipe leaks you have. As long as there is a moisture source, mold will grow right back. Next, remove as much of the porous, moldy material as you can. Moldy drywall and insulation can't be cleaned properly—it needs to be thrown out. Once the house is down to the studs, use a wire brush or a power grinder to scrub away visible mold. After you've scrubbed the mold, vacuum the area with a vacuum *equipped with a HEPA filter*—regular vacuum-cleaner filters won't catch the tiny mold spores. Throw away debris and dust from the moldy area in a double-bagged heavy-duty plastic garbage bag. Finally, wipe away visible mold using a detergent or general-purpose cleanser. Always use a clean surface of the rag to avoid just spreading the mold around.

Is it safe to clean mold?

It is very important to protect yourself while cleaning your home of mold. Wear some sort of filter mask—***either an N95-rated dust mask, or a double-filter respirator with replaceable cartridge***. Wear eye protection and heavy work gloves. When using chemicals, keep the room well-ventilated, wear rubber gloves, and follow the manufacturer's instructions. Never mix bleach and ammonia. Cover your skin to prevent irritation, and either clean your clothing thoroughly after working, or wear coveralls that can be thrown away.

Most importantly, pay attention to how you're feeling. If you start to feel sick or start to have trouble breathing, stop cleaning, get some fresh air, and use more protection if you decide to go back to the job. If you have asthma or other lung illnesses, or if you start feeling sick while working on your house, you should not clean your own home of mold.

What about sealants and fungicides?

Applying a sealant to the cleaned wood in your home can help keep the mold from growing back. You can use a heavy-duty primer paint, like Kilz 2 or Glidden Gripper, to seal the wood. There are also lots of sealing products that contain fungicides, like MoldShield. If you do use a sealer, make sure that the wood is dry (under 18% relative humidity) before you apply the seal. If the wood is cool to the touch, it is probably still too wet to seal.

How do I keep the mold from coming back?

There is no way to keep your home completely mold-free. However, you can minimize the amount of mold you have. The most important factor you control is the moisture level in your home. Try to keep the humidity levels low inside your house, and fix roof leaks, leaky pipes, etc. right away. Plenty of airflow will also help keep mold away. Remember, mold is everywhere, and you won't get rid of all of it. That's ok. Get the levels down to where you can't see or smell the mold, and you'll be in a good position to rebuild. Good luck!