

Mould growth after a flood

If a building has been flooded for more than two days or there is visible water damage or musty odours following a flood, then you can assume that the building's interior is contaminated with mould.

To prevent the mould from spreading it is important to clean up and dry out the house as quickly as possible, within 24 to 48 hours. Open doors and windows to let the house air-out for as long as possible.

What is mould?

Mould is a type of fungi and belongs to a group of organisms that also include mushrooms and yeasts.

Mould is present at low levels virtually everywhere, both indoors and outdoors. People are exposed to mould on a daily basis without harm.

Mould looks like fuzz, or a stain or smudge and most commonly they are black, green or white in appearance. They can produce a musty smell.

Mould needs a food source (dirt, dust, wood, organic matter) and moisture to grow. Mould growth typically occurs in wet or moist areas that are poorly ventilated.

Mould reproduces by making spores which can travel through the air when mould is disturbed (e.g. during cleaning). When these spores land on damp spots, they may continue to grow and spread.

There are many different types of mould and some have the potential to cause health problems in people who are sensitive or allergic to them.

People with asthma, allergies or other respiratory diseases are more sensitive to mould. People with weakened immune systems (such as HIV infection, chemotherapy patients, or organ transplant patients) are more at risk of a mould infection in their respiratory system.

If you are concerned about the health effects of mould, seek medical advice.

Preventing mould

Mould can only grow where there is moisture, so the key to preventing mould is to reduce dampness in your home.

Mould growth can be prevented or minimized by using heat, insulation and ventilation:

- Heat – a continuous, low level of dry heat will allow warmth to penetrate the walls and ceilings, keeping them dry.
- Insulation – insulated walls and ceilings stay warmer, keeping the heat in and reducing condensation.
- Ventilation – opening a door or window reduces moisture and humidity, both of which are required for mould growth. All areas of a house should be regularly ventilated. Use exhaust fans when bathing, showering, cooking, doing laundry or drying clothes.

You can also reduce mould growth by:

- Opening curtains and blinds during the day
- Wiping away condensation on windows and windowsills
- Cleaning and drying surfaces that get wet regularly (e.g. bathroom tiles)
- Installing exhaust fans in areas that are prone to condensation (e.g. bathrooms, kitchens)
- Ensuring all exhaust fans are vented to the outside air
- Using lids on saucepans to reduce moisture
- Keeping rooms uncluttered to allow air movement
- Hanging wet clothes outdoors
- Keeping the roof, cladding and guttering in good repair to prevent leaks.

Removing mould

There is generally no need to test for mould in your home. If you can see or smell mould, you need to clean it up to prevent it from spreading and to prevent it from damaging the surfaces it grows on.

People who should avoid mould clean-up and avoid being present during clean-up include:

- Children under 12 years
- Pregnant women
- People over 65 years
- People with allergies and respiratory conditions such as asthma
- People with weakened immune systems such as HIV infection or chemotherapy patients.

Cleaning tips

Small areas of mould can be cleaned by using mild detergent or a vinegar mixture (4 parts vinegar to 1 part water).

If the mould is not easily removed, use diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 3 parts water).

When cleaning mould, do not dry-brush the area as you may disperse mould spores into the air which may cause health problems or establish growth in other areas.

Wear rubber gloves, safety glasses and make sure the area is well-ventilated.

Absorbent materials such as carpets, upholstery and mattresses need to be discarded if they are contaminated with mould.

If mould contamination is extensive then a professional cleaner should be consulted.

More information

For more information about the health effects of mould, visit the Department of Health website at www.health.tas.gov.au/mould or call healthdirect on 1800 022 222 (24 hour / 7 days).