



## ISLAND COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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### *HEALTH INFORMATION BULLETIN (HIB)*

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**HIB #103**

### **INDOOR AIR QUALITY - MOLD**

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#### **Topics covered in this HIB:**

- What exactly is mold?
  - Can mold cause health problems?
  - Should I test for mold?
  - Why is mold growing in my home?
  - How do I get rid of mold?
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#### **What exactly is mold?**

Molds are fungi and occur naturally in the environment. There are many different kinds of mold and if conditions are favorable, they can grow on almost any material. Molds reproduce by forming spores. When the mold spores circulate in the air and land on suitable material, they will begin to grow. Molds become a problem when they grow inside homes and buildings. Mold growth may not be obvious if it is located in crawlspaces, attics, above ceilings, behind walls, or in basements. As molds grow on building materials, they become destructive, may stain walls and ceilings and can breakdown studs and joists of buildings causing extensive damage. In addition to the property damage, mold is also a health concern.

#### **Can mold cause health problems?**

Mold can cause health problems by producing allergens, irritants, and potentially toxic substances (mycotoxins). People who are allergic to mold can experience symptoms such as itchy eyes, runny nose and sore throat. In more severe cases, a person with pre-existing health conditions such as asthma, allergies or lung conditions could develop breathing difficulties when exposed to mold. Very young infants and the elderly may also be at an increased risk of exhibiting adverse health effects related to mold exposure. Different molds may produce different mycotoxins which can affect the central nervous system, immune system, respiratory system and/or digestive system, so it is important that mold problems be remediated. Individuals should consult their physician if they experience any severe exposures or health effects associated with a mold exposure.

## Should I test for mold?

In most cases, if a visual inspection identifies that mold growth is present, additional testing or sampling is not necessary. If you see mold, then you have a mold problem, which needs to be fixed. Visible mold growth may be different colors (yellow, green, brown or black) and may vary in shape (may be a circular pattern or spread across an area). The variation will depend on the type of mold present. Molds may cause staining on walls and ceilings and breakdown of cellulose containing materials such as drywall, ceiling tiles and framing materials. Molds may also emit an unpleasant odor or musty smell when present.

## How do I get rid of mold?

To prevent or control indoor mold, identify and correct the moisture problem and thoroughly clean the area or remove any items contaminated by the mold. Corrective action and remediation to address the mold conditions identified must be done to prevent further property damage and exposures. If the moisture problem is not fixed, then the mold problem will likely reoccur.

Who should do the cleanup of the mold depends on the size of the mold problem and the extent of the damage the mold has caused. The general rule is that if the water damage and/or mold growth covers more than 10 square feet, contact the EPA Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse (800-438-4318). Or visit their website at: [www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/mold\\_remediation.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/mold_remediation.html). You can also contact the Northwest Clean Air Agency at (800-622-4627) or [www.nwcleanair.org/index.asp](http://www.nwcleanair.org/index.asp). If the mold growth is less than 10 square feet, you can choose to handle the job yourself or hire a qualified contractor who is experienced in cleaning up mold. Caution should be taken when handling or cleaning moldy materials, use a mask or respirator to prevent breathing airborne spores, wear protective clothing, goggles, and rubber gloves. Follow guidance from the EPA and NWAPA for safely cleaning up mold or finding a contractor.

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### Glossary of Terms:

- **Mycotoxins** - a toxic substance produced by a fungus, especially a mold.
- **Allergens** - substances that can cause allergic reactions.

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**Other Informational Resources**

- <http://www.islandcounty.net/health>
- <http://www.emp.gov/iaq/molds.html>
- <http://www.energy.wsu.edu/projects/building/iaq.cfm>
- <http://www.nwair.org>

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*NOTE:* The information presented within this Health Information Bulletin (HIB) is provided to assist with the clarification of a detailed and complex process generally involving rules and regulations. The information contained in this HIB may not provide a complete description of all the required elements of a permit process; therefore, it is always recommended that an applicant review the pertinent regulation or discuss their plans with a Health Department representative.

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