

# Do I Have a Workplace Mould Problem?

## OHS information for workers and employers

### Purpose

This Safety Bulletin has been developed to assist employers and workers in understanding the risks of exposure to moulds and how to prevent harmful effects. The recommendations described reflect what is currently known about this topic.

### What Is Mould?

Mould is a type of plant belonging to the fungi family. It occurs naturally both indoors and outdoors. Other types of fungi include yeast, mildew and mushrooms. Mould needs the right combination of water, nutrients and a suitable temperature to grow. Moulds are often relatively harmless e.g. *Cladosporium* or common “leaf mould”. Moulds can be useful, as in the preparation of foods and antibiotics. In some circumstances; however, they may pose a health hazard.

### Health Effects - What health effects could workers experience from mould in the workplace?

Since moulds are abundant in nature, people are exposed to them daily. Most people exposed to background levels of mould have no health effects. However, some individuals, when exposed to high levels of moulds, may experience adverse health effects. These include allergic reactions, infections or toxic effects. Common symptoms of toxic effects include headache, abnormal fatigue, nausea, eye and respiratory irritation and aggravation of asthma or allergies. Most exposed individuals experience mild or no effects.

Since many of these health effects can be attributed to other causes, individuals experiencing these symptoms should check with their doctor if they suspect the problem might be due to mould.

### Did You Know?

Some individuals are at increased risk of experiencing health effects from exposure to moulds. These include:

- persons with weakened immune systems;
- persons who have recently undergone surgery;
- persons with inflammatory lung disease;
- infants; and
- elderly.

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## Where Is Mould Most Likely Encountered?

Although mould can be found almost everywhere, elevated levels of mould are most frequently found in areas where there are wet building materials (most often paper or wood-based) and where there has been water damage. Common sources of moisture include leaking pipes, sewer backups, moisture condensing on cold surfaces, high humidity environments, leaky roofs and flooding events.

## Where Is Mould Most Likely To Be A Problem?

Mould is most likely to be a problem when substantially more mould is found indoors than outdoors or when the types of indoor mould differ from those found outdoors. Both these conditions indicate mould is growing indoors. The problem can be more serious if the mould is a toxic type such as *Aspergillus* or *Stachybotrys*.

Clues to a possible mould problem include musty odours or individuals reporting mould-related symptoms of illness. Identifying contamination can be as simple as seeing mouldy material on exposed surfaces or as difficult as finding hidden mould in carpets, behind walls or within ventilation systems. Where a mould problem is suspected, it may be necessary to consult an experienced indoor air quality professional such as an industrial or occupational hygienist, or a building engineering specialist.

## What Can Be Done To Prevent Mould From Becoming A Problem?

Controlling the growth of moulds is the best way of preventing problems. Regularly cleaning carpets and other surfaces, promptly repairing water leaks, properly maintaining heating, ventilating and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems, avoiding high humidity levels, selecting of building materials appropriate to the anticipated environmental conditions, and using HEPA-filtered vacuum systems or alternatively, central vacuum systems vented to the outdoors all help to prevent mould.

## What Can Be Done If There Is A Mould Problem?

When visible mould is present or indoor mould levels are substantially greater than the levels found outdoors, contaminated materials may need to be cleaned, disinfected or removed. When responding to a mould problem, consider the following:

- explain the health risks to the affected workers;
- if possible, isolate the source of contamination from the rest of the workplace to reduce potential worker exposure;
- eliminate the moisture source. If the moisture is not controlled or eliminated, the mould problem will return. If this is not possible eliminate the materials capable of sustaining mould growth. Cleaning staff should be able to control small areas, where the patch of mould covers up to 0.09 m<sup>2</sup> (1 ft<sup>2</sup>), by following normal cleaning procedures. This usually involves cleaning affected areas with soap or detergents. There should be no visible mould left following cleaning activities and the waste should be sealed in a plastic bag for disposal; and

# Do I Have a Workplace Mould Problem?

- moderate or large areas of mould, where the patch of mould covers more than 0.09 m<sup>2</sup> (1 ft<sup>2</sup>), should be dealt with by hiring an indoor air quality specialist and/or mould abatement contractor. Proper procedures, equipment and appropriately trained abatement workers will be needed.

## Legislative Requirements

Under Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act, employers are required to protect the health and safety of workers. Where worker exposure to harmful substances may occur, an employer must establish controls to minimize worker exposure. The OHS Code Explanation Guide provides additional information regarding the requirements related to mould.

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## Contact Us

### OHS Contact Centre

Edmonton & Surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Throughout Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired:

- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)
- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)

### Website

[work.alberta.ca/ohs-contact-us](http://work.alberta.ca/ohs-contact-us)

## Get Copies of OHS Act, Regulation and Code

### Alberta Queen's Printer

[www.qp.gov.ab.ca](http://www.qp.gov.ab.ca)

### Occupational Health and Safety

[work.alberta.ca/ohs-laws](http://work.alberta.ca/ohs-laws)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The following may be useful if a potential mould problem needs to be investigated or where substantial amounts of contamination need to be removed.

It may also be necessary to consult a qualified indoor air quality specialist, such as an industrial or occupational hygienist, or building engineering specialist, to help interpret these and other available guidelines

[OHS Code Explanation Guide](#)

[Best Practices – Mould at the Work Site](#)

[Guidelines on Assessment and Remediation of Fungi in Indoor Environments. New York City Department of Health, 2008](#)

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