

## ***Information for Parents from Environmental Pediatricians:*** **MOLD FOUND IN SCHOOLS**

### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

- 1. Mold is widely found outdoors and can grow indoors in damp or water damaged areas.**
- 2. The most common health effects of mold exposure are allergies (“hay fever”) and asthma attacks in those with asthma who are sensitive to mold.**
- 3. The most important action the school can take is to safely and effectively remediate mold and fix the underlying water problem. EPA “Tools for Schools” can provide guidance to improve indoor air quality issues including mold.**

### **WHAT IS MOLD?**

Mold (a type of “fungus”) is widely found outdoors and can grow indoors in damp or water damaged areas.

- Mold is a common type of fungus. Fungi include a large group of organisms that are a natural part of the environment, and grow in wet, dark places (such as near lakes or forests). **There are almost always some mold spores in the air, even in cities.**
- **Mold can grow inside buildings with water damage or high humidity.** Mold growth usually has a musty odor. Mold growth on walls, furniture, and carpet may have discolored patches or a speckled, cottony appearance.
- There are hundreds of species of mold. Some of the most common mold species that can grow indoors include *aspergillus*, *penicillium*, *alternaria*, and *cladosporidium*.

### **CAN MOLD MAKE MY CHILD SICK?**

The most common health effects of mold exposure are allergies (“hay fever”) and asthma attacks in those with asthma who are sensitive to mold.

- The most common symptoms from exposure to mold spores are **allergy symptoms** such as sneezing, runny nose, cough, rash, and itchiness of the nose, throat, or eyes (“**hay fever**”).
- Mold exposure can trigger an **asthma attack** in people with asthma who are sensitive to mold.
- People with weak immune systems (such as cancer patients) are at higher risk of getting sick from mold.
- Several disorders that involve “hypersensitivity” to mold, such as allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis (ABPA), occur in patients with underlying lung disease (such as cystic fibrosis). Workers (such as farmers) with high occupational exposure to airborne mold may develop disorders called hypersensitivity pneumonitis (HP). **Generally healthy people are at much lower risk, especially from common environmental exposure to mold.**

## THERE HAVE BEEN SCARY STORIES IN THE NEWS ABOUT “BLACK MOLD”. SHOULD I BE WORRIED IF THIS WAS FOUND IN MY CHILD’S SCHOOL?

The presence of mold, including *stachybotrys* or “black mold”, does not mean that your child will get sick.

- Many species of mold, including *stachybotrys* (known as “black mold” or “toxic mold” in the media), can make substances called “mycotoxins”. Mycotoxins are not released into the air (they tend to “stick” to the mold) and are unlikely to pose a health risk to people who attend a school contaminated with *stachybotrys*.
- Many molds look similar to *stachybotrys* or “black mold”. **The presence of any species of mold indicates a need to find the source of the water problem and take action to safely fix it.**
- In rare circumstances, exposure to mycotoxins can cause health effects when large amounts of moldy crops or grains are ingested. There is no scientific evidence to prove that household exposure to mycotoxins causes health conditions such as chronic fatigue, memory loss, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

## SHOULD I GET MY CHILD TESTED FOR MOLD EXPOSURE?

Tests for the presence of mold “toxins” in the body are not validated or recommended; however, children with allergies or asthma may benefit from environmental allergy testing.

- If your child has allergies or asthma and you suspect that mold exposure is related to their allergy or asthma symptoms, you should talk to your healthcare provider about testing to determine what environmental exposures may be a trigger.
- Allergy testing may include skin or blood tests, and should be done by a pediatric allergy doctor (allergist). The blood tests include a specific test for antibodies to mold (“mold-specific IgE”); these antibodies are proteins that can trigger allergy symptoms.
- Several tests (such as urine mycotoxin tests) advertised for mold and mycotoxins are **not recommended** by our practice. **These tests are not validated for clinical use.** Since mold is so common in our environment, many healthy people can have mycotoxins in their urine, and it is unclear what levels are linked to health effects.

## IS THERE A TREATMENT FOR MOLD EXPOSURE?

The most important “treatment” is removing the mold and fixing the underlying water problem. Alternative treatments or detoxifications should be avoided. Children with asthma or allergies should be treated for those conditions by their pediatrician.

- **The most important “treatment” for mold exposure is removing the mold from your child’s environment and fixing the underlying water problem.**
- **Do not use products that claim to be alternative treatments or detoxifications for mold or mycotoxin exposure.** These treatments are not scientifically proven, may have serious health risks, and are not recommended by physicians who use scientific information to guide their medical practices.
- For children with **allergies (hay fever)**, treatment with routine allergy medications under the direction of your pediatrician is recommended. Depending on the severity of the symptoms, your pediatrician may also recommend allergy testing.

- For children with **asthma**, treatment with their regular asthma medications under the direction of your pediatrician is recommended. The school should also minimize your child’s exposure to the mold and remove the mold in a timely manner.
  - Remember to share the [Asthma Action Plan](#) you created with your doctor with your child’s school!
- Children who have weak immune systems (for example, children undergoing chemotherapy) are at risk for serious fungal infections that will need careful medical treatment from their physician. People with normal immune systems generally do not get serious fungal infections.

**I AM WORRIED THAT THERE IS MOLD IN MY CHILD’S SCHOOL.  
SHOULD I ASK THE SCHOOL TO TEST THE AIR FOR MOLD LEVELS?**

If mold or water damage is seen or smelled, that is enough evidence to take action to safely remove the mold and fix the underlying water problem.

- **Environmental mold testing (for example, air testing for spore levels) is generally not necessary if a musty odor, water damage or visible mold is present**--that information alone is enough for the school to safely remove the mold and fix the underlying water problem.
- **Mold spore levels alone do not provide information that helps to measure health risks from mold exposure.** There are no established guidelines for what level of mold spores is acceptable for an indoor environment. **The bottom line is that if mold is identified, it should be fixed.**
- **If a school already had testing done:** If results show indoor mold spore levels that are higher than the outdoor levels measured at the same time, this confirms that there is a source of mold growing inside the school that should be fixed. This mold is most often visible.
- In some cases, it may be useful for the school to hire a professional (such as an industrial hygienist) to perform a thorough inspection to find the source of water leaks or to use a moisture meter to determine if walls are too damp and may lead to mold growth. Wall moisture should ideally be less than 15%.

**HOW CAN I WORK WITH MY CHILD’S SCHOOL TO PREVENT MOLD GROWTH?**

The keys to preventing mold at schools is to control indoor humidity levels and fix water leak problems in a safe and effective way.

- **The bottom line: The key to preventing mold is controlling moisture.** Any suspected water leak or area of water damage should be evaluated and remediated quickly by the school, as mold can start to grow within 24 to 48 hours.
- The most important way to prevent any health effects from mold is for the school to safely **remove the source of mold and take steps to prevent future mold growth.**
- The **Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools program** has guidelines for safe and effective prevention of mold and other hazards in schools. Older buildings with water damage are likely to have other possible risks, such as lead paint or pests that may be harmful to health.
- **How can I work with my school to implement the IAQ Tools for Schools program?**
  - **Share IAQ Tools for Schools resources** (see the link below) with your school’s administration and encourage them to review the [IAQ Tools for Schools Action Kit](#) and implement its practices in your school
    - Check out *IAQ Tools for Schools* resources: [www.epa.gov/iaq-schools](http://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools)

- **Spread the word!** Share these resources with other parents and convey the importance of using safe and effective practices to control mold and other environmental hazards in schools.
- **Partner with teachers.** The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has a “Safety and Health” program that provides site visits at public schools to assess for indoor air quality concerns:  
[www.uft.org/our-rights/safety-health](http://www.uft.org/our-rights/safety-health)

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

EPA “Tools for Schools”:  
[www.epa.gov/iaq-schools](http://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools)

NY State Department of Health program “Clean, Green, & Healthy Schools”:  
[www.health.ny.gov/environmental/indoors/healthy\\_schools/index.htm](http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/indoors/healthy_schools/index.htm)

NYC Department of Health Guidelines for Safe and Effective Mold Remediation:  
[www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/epi-mold-guidelines.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/epi-mold-guidelines.pdf)

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):  
[www.epa.gov/mold](http://www.epa.gov/mold)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):  
[www.cdc.gov/mold](http://www.cdc.gov/mold)

Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units (PEHSU):  
[www.pehsu.net](http://www.pehsu.net)

NY Children’s Environmental Health Centers:  
[www.nyscheck.org](http://www.nyscheck.org)

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) - information on asthma and allergies:  
[www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/allergies-asthma/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/allergies-asthma/Pages/default.aspx)

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