Mould and your health

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Mould is a type of fungi that lives on plant and animal matter. Mould grows best in damp and poorly ventilated areas, and reproduces by making spores. Airborne mould spores are commonly found in both indoor and outdoor environments. When they land on damp spots indoors, they may begin to grow and spread.

There is no practical way to eliminate all mould indoors; the way to control indoor mould growth is to control the source of moisture.

**Mould appearance**

Mould associated with damp buildings can trigger nasal congestion, sneezing, cough, wheeze, respiratory infections and worsen asthma and allergic conditions.

People who are more susceptible to these symptoms and other serious health effects include those with:

- weakened immune systems
- allergies
- severe asthma
- chronic, obstructive, or allergic lung diseases.

You should seek medical advice if you are concerned about the effects of mould.

**Controlling mould growth**

Generally, if you can see or smell mould, you need to clean up and remove the mould immediately, as mould can damage surfaces it grows on. The longer it grows the more damage it can cause.

Mould only grows when there is sufficient moisture. When mould appears, the first task is to try to establish where the moisture is coming from.

Parts of a house that get wet or have poor ventilation are prone to mould growth, such as:

- kitchens, bathrooms and laundries – due to condensation or high humidity and leaking pipes
- cupboards and corners – due to restricted ventilation
- walls or windows that are exposed to hot indoor air and cold outdoor air
- walls and ceilings – due to insufficient insulation or rain seeping through the roof.

Avoid conditions encouraging mould growth, by using heat, insulation and ventilation. The cheapest and easiest way of reducing moisture and humidity levels is by ventilating a room by opening a door or window. Use exhaust fans where available.

**Rising damp issues**

Rising damp is ground moisture rising up a brick or stone wall. Poor sub-floor ventilation or moisture in the sub-floor area will worsen the problem.

Rising damp can be fixed by installing a new damp-course or waterproof barrier in the wall. Make sure the weep holes and air vents at the base of your home are uncovered. An experienced building consultant can recommend ways to fix the problem.

**Actions you can take to reduce mould**

There are some things that you can do to help prevent mould in your home, including:

- Fix leaky plumbing and other building faults.
- Use exhaust fans or open windows in the bathroom and kitchen when showering, cooking or using the dishwasher.
• Vent clothes dryers to the outside.
• Avoid conditions that encourage mould growth by using heat insulation and ventilation.
• Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter.
• Clean up mould

**Rental properties with mould issues**

When a rental property has mould, the owner should fix any mould caused by faults in gutters or other fixtures, but the tenant must make sure there is adequate ventilation throughout, to help avoid mould problems during winter.

Sometimes, the cause of the mould growth may be due to a building fault that may not be easily rectified.

If as a tenant, you have taken measures to make sure the building is properly ventilated and mould is still growing, you should raise the issue with the owner. Tenants seeking further advice on their rights can contact the Tenants Union of Victoria on 03 9416 2577.

**Testing for mould in your home**

It is generally not considered necessary to test for mould in the home, as it is usually visible and easily identified. However, not all mould is visible, as contamination may be in cavities or the ceiling.

If you suspect mould contamination but cannot find the source of the problem, or if you have already taken measures to prevent mould from growing and you are still having problems, you could employ an occupational hygienist or environmental health and safety professional. For a fee, these professionals can provide specialist mould testing and consultancy services.

**Mould growth after flooding**

Flooding, excess moisture and pooled water can contribute to the growth of mould in your home, which may be a health risk for you and your family.

When returning to your home, be aware of any visible mould or a musty smell. High mould levels are likely if the house has been flooded for more than two days. The key to preventing mould growth is to clean up and dry out the house as quickly as possible (within 24 to 48 hours).

If you are visiting your house to collect belongings, visually inspect for damage or to do basic clean-up over short periods:
• wear sturdy footwear, and rubber or leather gloves
• it is preferable that footwear is waterproof and has rubber soles
• it is not usually necessary to wear a respirator unless you are sensitive to mould.

Before cleaning or disposing of water or mould-damaged items, always seek expert advice from your insurance company.

Before you plan your clean-up, remember that not everyone is suited to working in damp, potentially mouldy conditions. Check that family members and volunteers who offer to help are not sensitive to mould.

People who should avoid being present during post-flood cleaning or repair works include:
• children (under 12 years, particularly infants)
• pregnant women
• people over 65 years
• those with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma, and chronic, obstructive, or allergic lung diseases.

You do not need to test for mould. You can assume that the building’s interior is contaminated with mould when:
• it has been flooded for more than two days
• visible mould growth is extensive (more than before the flood)
• visible water damage is present or musty odours are strong.

If you’ve decided to remove mould, make sure there is good ventilation, wear protective clothing such as a shower cap, rubber gloves, eye protection, overalls, suitable footwear and a P1 or P2 face mask (available from your hardware store).

The more extensive the contamination, the greater the personal risk of exposure during the clean-up process. Consider using professional cleaners who can remove the mould if the area to clean is large.

**Steps to minimise mould growth after flooding**

Mould removal efforts after flooding should focus on:
• removing all sources of pooled water or excessive moisture from the home
• removing all wet or flood damaged items, including wallpaper, plasterboard, carpet, rugs, bedding, mattresses, furniture, stuffed toys, clothing, and other wet or damaged materials that cannot be adequately dried or cleaned
• removing all porous (soft or absorbent) materials with mould growth
• temporarily storing damaged or discarded items outside the home (in a safe, clean, dry place such as a shed or garage) until your insurance claim is processed
• cleaning and disinfecting all affected surfaces inside the house, including floors, walls, the kitchen, bathroom and laundry
• allowing the house to dry throughout by airing or active drying (for example, using fans or dehumidifiers once safe, reliable power has been restored to the property).

Air conditioning or central heating should not be used unless they are undamaged and uncontaminated by the floodwaters. If you suspect contamination with mould or
floodwaters, do not use until these systems have been cleaned and checked by a qualified person.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- State Emergency Service Victoria (SES) Tel. 132 500 – for emergency flood or storm assistance
- SES Victoria Flood and Storm Information Line Tel. 1300 842 737
- Environmental health section of your local council
- Your insurance company
- Tenants Union of Victoria Tel. 03 9416 2577

References


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Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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Allergies

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Allergy basics
- Allergic reactions
- Allergens and triggers
- Food allergies and intolerance
- Living with allergies

Allergy basics

- Allergic reactions emergency first aid
  Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) and asthma attacks need urgent emergency first aid. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000).
- Allergies explained
  Allergy occurs when the body overreacts to a 'trigger' that is harmless to most people.
- Allergy testing
  Allergy testing is used to find which substances provoke an allergic reaction.
- Asthma and allergens
  Many people with asthma find their symptoms can worsen when they are exposed to certain allergens like house dust mite, animal dander, pollen and mould.
- Immune system explained
  The immune system remembers every germ it has ever overcome.

Allergic reactions

- Anaphylaxis
  Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that requires urgent medical attention.
- Eczema (atopic dermatitis)
  Eczema can vary in severity, and symptoms may flare up or subside from day to day.
- Hay fever
  Hay fever is an allergic reaction to airborne allergens that can occur at any time of the year.
- Hives
  Hives (urticaria) is a reaction to the release of histamine into the skin.
- Thunderstorm asthma - Mohamed Barre (video)

Allergens and triggers

- Allergies to bites and stings
Allergies to insect stings and bites range from milder allergic reactions to life-threatening, severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis).

- **Allergies to medications**
  All medication has the potential to cause allergies but some people can have allergic reactions to specific prescription or over-the-counter medications.

- **Aspergillus**
  Aspergillus is a fungus that commonly grows on rotting vegetation. It can cause asthma symptoms.

- **Avoid asthma triggers**
  Asthma triggers are substances, conditions or activities that lead to symptoms of asthma. Asthma symptoms include difficulty breathing, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. These symptoms can...

- **Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma**
  People who have asthma or hay fever can get severe asthma symptoms during pollen season when high grass pollen counts combine with a certain type of thunderstorm.

- **House dust mite**
  Areas around the home that are heavily used, such as beds and upholstered furniture, will have much higher mite populations than the rest of the house.

- **Latex allergy**
  The best way to manage latex allergy is to avoid exposure to latex products.

- **Mould and your health**
  The way to control indoor mould growth is to control the source of moisture.

- **Thunderstorm asthma - Mohamed Barre (video)**

**Food allergies and intolerance**

- **Coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity**
  Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten.

- **Cow’s milk allergy**
  Milk allergy symptoms range from mild to a life-threatening severe allergic reaction. Avoid food containing milk only under strict medical supervision.

- **Egg allergy**
  Egg allergy is one of the most common causes of allergies in children with symptoms ranging from mild to life-threatening reactions.

- **Food additives**
  The long-term effects of consuming a combination of different additives in our food are currently unknown.

- **Food allergy and intolerance**
  Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction.

- **Gluten-free diet**
  Gluten sensitivity can be managed with a gluten-free diet.

- **Have you had an allergic reaction to packaged food?**
  The Food Standards Code requires that certain foods must be listed on the package of a food, or made known to the customer upon request. If you experience an allergic reaction to a known allergen not...

- **Nut allergies**
  Peanuts, tree nuts and seeds can all cause allergies with symptoms ranging from milder reactions to a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

- **Raw (unpasteurised) milk**
  Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurised to kill bacteria that could be harmful to humans.

- **Shellfish and fish allergies**
  Symptoms of fish and shellfish allergies vary and range from milder reactions to a life-threatening severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

**Living with allergies**

- **Allergic reactions emergency first aid**
Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) and asthma attacks need urgent emergency first aid. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000).

- Asthma-friendly home
  There are many ways in which you can transform your home into an asthma-friendly environment...
- Travelling with an allergy
  If you have an allergy, visit your doctor before you travel, especially if you are at risk of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) or an asthma attack...

Related Information

- Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma
  People who have asthma or hay fever can get severe asthma symptoms during pollen season when high grass pollen counts combine with a certain type of thunderstorm...
- Asthma-friendly home
  There are many ways in which you can transform your home into an asthma-friendly environment...
- Asthma explained
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...
- Asthma management
  An asthma action plan can help you take control of your asthma and feel confident managing it...
- Avoiding asthma triggers
  Asthma triggers are substances, conditions or activities that lead to symptoms of asthma. Asthma symptoms include difficulty breathing, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. These symptoms can...

Home

Related information on other websites

- A brief guide to mold, moisture, and your home, United States Environmental Protection Agency.
- Indoor environmental quality: dampness and mould in buildings, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.
- What to do before during and after a flood, Emergency Management Australia.

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Multilingual resources to assist you after a flood

- After a flood: animal and insect related hazards
- After a flood: mould and your health
- After a flood: returning home safely
- Emergency, crisis and support services
- FloodSafe (audio)
- FloodSafe fact sheet
- Help For You And Your Family After Disaster Fact Sheet
- In an emergency call triple zero (000)
- StormSafe fact sheet
- StormSafe (audio)
- Your emergency rediplan

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