

Mold and Your Health

By Elle Markey

Hurricane Sandy and her crazy sister, Hurricane Katrina, left more behind than just physical devastation. The aftermath of both incidents left victims with an additional health concern: MOLD.

Mold is a fungi that causes disintegration of organic matter. Mold cells, (i.e. mold spores) are inhaled into the lungs every day, whether you are indoors or outside. Cardboard, ceiling tiles, wood products, dust, paints, wallpaper, insulation materials, drywall, carpet, fabric and upholstery support mold growth when damp or wet. Therefore, flood damage can greatly increase the risk of having indoor mold.

Typically, mold is a natural occurrence and poses no health risks. However a high level of exposure to mold can aggravate those with asthma, immune suppression, allergies, COPD, bronchitis and other lung-related conditions making their symptoms worse. In addition, very large doses of mold can also cause infection and toxicity in those with weakened immune systems.

“In 2004 the Institute of Medicine (IOM) found there was sufficient evidence to link indoor exposure to mold with upper respiratory tract symptoms, cough, and wheeze in otherwise healthy people; with asthma symptoms in people with asthma; and with hypersensitivity pneumonitis in individuals susceptible to that immune-mediated condition. The IOM also found limited or suggestive evidence linking indoor mold exposure and respiratory illness in otherwise healthy children.”-Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Amanda Geraci, one of the chief organizers for the Occupy Sandy Recovery Team, is experiencing first-hand the serious health issues facing the storm's aftermath:

“One of the major concerns we are having on the ground is the long term effects from mold and demolition exposure that people will be dealing with. Already in places like Staten Island, Union Beach, and Point Pleasant our people (volunteers and residents) are experiencing heavy coughing, respiratory infections, and increase mucus, phlegm, and fatigue. I'm concerned and certain it is only going to get worse.”-Amanda Geraci, LSW

The most common health concern is hay-fever like symptoms, including nasal stuffiness, eye irritation/watery eyes and sneezing. However severe mold exposure can produce more severe symptoms like wheezing, skin irritation, fatigue, nausea and headache.

What Can We Do?

Inspect your home carefully. Mold can typically be seen (green/brown/black) and/or smelled (moldy/mildew scent).

Clean thoroughly. Commercial products, soap and water or a bleach solution can usually remove mold from hard surfaces, but that may not be aggressive enough for porous or absorbent materials.

Don't be afraid to throw stuff out. Absorbent or porous materials containing mold like ceiling tiles, drywall, wood, carpeting, paper etc. may need to go.

Hire a professional. Mold remediation can be overwhelming or not completely effective if done yourself. If the area is not properly cleaned and/or dried, you can still have an allergic reaction to parts of the dead mold. In addition, mold contamination may redevelop if moisture is still present or if moisture returns. There are many companies who have experience in thoroughly cleaning mold in buildings and homes. Do a web search or ask for a recommendation.

Stay with a friend/relative. Limit your exposure while things get cleaned up.

Implement a respiratory wellness program. A good program may include:

- Exercise more regularly. The CDC recommends 30 minutes of exercise daily. Make sure you consult your physician before beginning a new exercise program.
- Drinking more water. Being hydrated helps thin mucus secretions.
- Wash your hands frequently. This can help prevent infections from getting into your system.
- Consider adding vitamins and supplements to your daily regimen. There are many products that are designed to support respiratory health.
- Upgrade your diet. Changing to a diet rich in nutrients known to support respiratory function like fresh fish, fruits and veggies.
- Increase the quality of the air you breathe. Get outside for fresh air, increase you indoor ventilation. Add house plants to your home.

Contact your physician. If you think you are experiencing symptoms of mold toxicity. Doctors can test you for mold-specific anti-bodies, as well as test you for mold allergies.

Learn more about mold. There are many resources available online. The Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization offer excellent information. Also, you can contact your local health department.

Share your knowledge. If you have friends or relatives that have been a victim of a hurricane or flooding, let them know they may be exposed to mold and the health problems associated with that exposure. Help them take action-knowledge is power.

Article sources:

<http://epi.publichealth.nc.gov/oii/mold/healtheffects.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/mold/stachy.htm>

<http://www.livestrong.com/article/352871-how-to-keep-my-respiratory-system-healthy/>