

After a flood: mould and your health

Community information

Mould is a type of fungi that lives on plant and animal matter. Mould grows best in damp and poorly ventilated areas; it reproduces by making spores. When airborne mould spores land on damp spots indoors, they may begin to grow and spread.

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

What does mould look like?

Mould is not always easy to recognise. It often looks like 'fuzz' or appears to be a stain, smudge or discoloration. The most common moulds are black, green or white. However, mould can be many other colours ranging from grey to orange to brown.

How does mould affect people?

Mould can trigger nasal congestion, sneezing, cough, wheeze and respiratory infections and worsen asthma and allergic conditions. People with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma or lung diseases are more susceptible.

Controlling mould growth

It is generally best to remove mould as soon as you see or smell it because it can damage surfaces it grows on. The longer it grows the more damage it can cause.

When mould appears, the first task is to establish where the moisture is coming from. Parts of the house that are prone to mould growth include:

- kitchens, bathrooms and laundries because of condensation or high humidity and leaking pipes
- cupboards and corners because of 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.

Use heat, insulation and ventilation to prevent mould growth. The easiest way is to open doors and windows. Use exhaust fans where available.

Rising damp issues

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

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

Actions you can take

- Fix leaky plumbing and other building faults.
- Use exhaust fans or open windows in the bathroom and kitchen when showering, cooking or using a dishwasher.
- Vent clothes dryers to the outside.
- Vacuum using a 'HEPA filter'.¹
- Clean up mould as soon as it appears.

For information on how to clean up and remove mould refer to the fact sheet: *Removing mould at home* on the Health website at: www.health.vic.gov.au

I live in a rental property that has mould. Where can I go for help?

The mould growth could be due to a building fault that may not be easily rectified. The owner should remedy mould caused by faults in gutters or other fixtures, but the tenant must ensure there is adequate ventilation throughout to help avoid mould problems during winter.

Tenants may wish to contact the Tenants Union of Victoria for further advice on (03) 9416 2577.

Should I test for mould in my home?

Mould can usually be seen, so it is generally not considered necessary to test for it in the home. If you suspect mould contamination but cannot find the source of the problem (it may be hidden in cavities or the ceiling), 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 48 hours). Before you plan your clean-up, remember that not everyone is suited to working in damp, potentially mouldy conditions.

The following people should avoid being present during post-flood cleaning or repair works:

- children (under 12 years, particularly infants)
- pregnant women
- people over 65 years of age
- those with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma or lung diseases.

Assume your home 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.

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

¹ A HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter is a type of filter that can trap a large amount of very small particles that other vacuum cleaners would simply recirculate back into the air of your home.

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

What should I wear to protect myself from mould in a flooded home?

If you are visiting your house to collect belongings, 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.

Cleaning up mould:

If you've decided to remove mould, ensure good ventilation and 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).

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Steps to minimise mould after a flood

1. Remove all sources of pooled water or excessive moisture from the home.
2. Remove all wet or flood-damaged items, including wallpaper, plasterboard, carpet, rugs, bedding, mattresses, furniture, stuffed toys, clothing and other materials that cannot be properly dried or cleaned.
3. Remove all porous (soft or absorbent) materials with mould growth.
4. Temporarily store 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.
5. Clean and disinfect all affected surfaces inside the house, including floors, walls, the kitchen, bathroom and laundry.
6. Allow the house to dry throughout by airing or active drying (for example, with fans or dehumidifiers).

Drying out the house after a flood

When returning to your home after a flood, open the doors and windows to air out the house. Once reliable, safe power is restored use fans and dehumidifiers to dry out the house.

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

For further information

- If you or anyone in your family feels unwell, get medical advice from your local doctor.
- For further information and help, contact the environmental health section of your local council.