

Mold and Mildew Awareness

What is the difference between molds and mildew?

Molds includes all species of microscopic fungi and can thrive on any organic matter, including clothing, leather, paper, and the ceilings, walls and floors of buildings with moisture problems. There are thousands of mold species and many are ubiquitous, meaning they can be found anywhere on earth and are always present. Some mold species can produce allergens and potentially toxic substances known as mycotoxins. While most molds are not toxic, some species can cause a physiological response in individuals with mold allergies even if other people in the area do not exhibit a response.

Mildew refers to certain kinds of molds and often lives on shower walls, windowsills, and other places where moisture levels are high. In unaired places, such as basements, they can produce a strong musty odor. Mold and mildew awareness is critical in preventing mold and mildew growth.

Conducive Conditions for Mold

Northwestern's campuses are comprised of a variety of buildings, including modern, LEED-certified facilities and our historic, century-old houses. With such a variety of building types, there are numerous challenges to overcome in an effort to regulate temperature and humidity and maintain heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. Preventing mold growth is dependent on controlling temperature and humidity levels, otherwise conditions can become conducive for mold and mildew growth.

Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

Preparation is Key: Keep the topic relevant. Work with your team to review mold and mildew awareness and discuss proactive efforts that can be made on campus.

Stay Positive: Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

Share a Story, Ask for a Story: Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Take hold and avoid mildew and mold

Though mold is ubiquitous, it can become problematic when indoor mold levels exceed outdoor mold levels or established industry guidelines. The best solution to mold problems is a proactive approach – below are a few key takeaways related to mold and mildew awareness and preventing the promotion of mold and mildew growth:

- Potential health effects and symptoms associated with mold exposures include allergic reactions, asthma, and other respiratory complaints.
- There is no practical way to eliminate all mold and mold spores in the indoor environment; the way to control indoor mold growth is to control moisture and regulate temperature.
- Clean mold off hard surfaces with water and detergent or bleach, and dry completely. Absorbent materials such as ceiling tiles and carpet squares, that are moldy, may need to be replaced.
- Mold growth can be mitigated by reducing indoor humidity to 30-60%, which can be achieved by venting bathrooms and other moisture-generating sources to the outside, using air conditioners and de-humidifiers, increasing ventilation, and using exhaust fans whenever cooking, dishwashing, and cleaning.
- Clean and dry any damp or wet building materials and furnishings within 24-48 hours to prevent mold growth.
- Prevent condensation by reducing its potential on cold surfaces by adding insulation (i.e. windows, piping, exterior walls, roof, or floors).
- If you are concerned about mold and mildew in your work area, contact Risk Management to conduct an indoor air quality assessment and determine if any mold testing is necessary.

Mold Myths

A common misnomer about mold is that "black mold is toxic." However, there are hundreds of mold species and many are described as black in color. The truth is that all black molds are not toxic and not all toxic molds are black.

Report all injuries on the Risk Management [website](#) or call 847.491.5582.

Learn more: Complete [Mold and Mildew Awareness](#) and [Asbestos Hazard Awareness](#) training.

Safety at Home

Molds are usually not a problem indoors, unless temperature and humidity levels are high, which can promote conditions in your home that are conducive for mold growth. The best defense is a good offense, so be proactive in discovering other potential moisture sources. However, if mold has already started to grow, the following steps can walk you through what to do next:

- ✓ Identify and repair the moisture source, such as a leaking faucet, ground seepage in a basement, or a broken window seal and ensure a regulated temperature.
- ✓ Remove and dispose of all damaged building materials and immediately increase air flow by opening windows and using fans and dehumidifiers.
- ✓ Depending on the extent of mold growth, it can be cleaned with mild detergent or a bleach solution and in some cases, hiring a professional remediation contractor may be necessary.

For Additional Information

Contact Gwen Butler, Director, Environmental Health & Safety, at 847.491.4936.

Do you or your team have a safety story you'd like to share? Contact Risk Management at gwen.butler@northwestern.edu for details.