

Homes & Real Estate

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EcoConsumer | To defeat mold, find and deal with the cause

In most cases, the type of mold that shows up in our home is fairly benign. But we shouldn't ignore mold, and we should always try to identify and address its cause.

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Special to NWhomes

Mold is not the scary monster of creeping crud that it's often portrayed to be.

In most cases, the type of mold that shows up in our home is fairly benign. But we shouldn't ignore mold, and we should always try to identify and address its cause.

Surprisingly, mold seems to be less of an issue in the Northwest than in many other parts of the country, despite our damp reputation. We don't have the high summer humidity of other regions, which helps lessen mold's impact here.

Mold does need to be on your radar screen, however, especially under these conditions.

If someone in your home has allergic reactions to mold. Such reactions are common, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These may include sneezing, a runny nose, red eyes, skin rashes and asthma attacks. When children or seniors in the home have mold allergies, act quickly to remove mold and to prevent it from coming back.

If you've had flooding. This could be from a plumbing leak or roof leak. More typically, it's from water getting into the basement after heavy rains, which happens in thousands of Seattle-area homes nearly every winter. One year after Superstorm Sandy on the East Coast, numerous homes that were flooded have severe mold problems, particularly if they were vacant for a period of time.

If your home is super energy efficient. Ironically, a "green" home can become a mold magnet if it's been weatherized and sealed up tight to conserve energy, but ventilation is poor. Homes or rooms kept very cool in the winter to save on energy costs also may have more mold issues. Make sure ventilation is a top priority.

"A mold problem is an excess-moisture problem," the Mount Vernon-based Northwest Clean Air Agency (nwcleanair.org) concisely explains in its online mold guide for renters and landlords. "Excess moisture comes from leaks or condensation."

Condensation occurs when moisture in the air turns into water on a cool surface. Microscopic mold spores, which are everywhere, find wet spots and build mold colonies.

Windowsills can get moldy if water forms puddles on them from window condensation. Exterior walls may attract condensation and mold because they are cooler, so make sure those walls get plenty of air circulation, especially in closets. Don't place clothes against the wall in exterior-wall closets.

To reduce condensation, use exhaust fans in bathrooms and kitchens, and cook with lids on. Consider a dehumidifier if heavy condensation persists.

Periodically check the nooks and crannies of your home for mold, including in the attic and crawl space. A strong musty smell, which is generated by mold-spore activity, is a dead giveaway.

After a flooding incident, make sure everything gets completely dried out, including inside your walls. When possible, choose moisture- and mold-resistant building materials for water-damage repairs — or any home-construction project, for that matter.

To remove mold on a solid surface, experts recommend scrubbing the area with a mild soap solution, such as laundry detergent and warm water. Allow it to dry completely. Items that have a musty or moldy smell can go in the washing machine.

The EPA advises that if you have a patch of mold larger than about 3 feet by 3 feet, you should consider hiring a mold-remediation company. Get personal recommendations or references and check online reviews before hiring a mold inspector or remediation firm.

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