

Mold in home can grow into health woes

By JENNIFER COLTON/Index-Journal 1/12/08

From the space behind your washing machine to ventilation ducts around your house, a common culprit might be contributing to your cold-like symptoms this season: mold.

"There are some common symptoms that can happen from mold exposure: watery eyes, runny nose, sneezing, headaches, fatigue, upper respiratory infections," said Chanelle Webster, program coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Quality Bureau of Air Quality.

"The more likely that you're exposed to it, the greater risk that you're going to have these symptoms, and it could get worse."

The extent of health effects varies with the sensitivity of the person, Webster said, but mold problems are most dangerous for pregnant women, the elderly, children and people with allergies. Children in homes with high mold show persistent, cold-like symptoms -- up to 300 percent more than average, according to DHEC information.

Particles of mold are too small for humans to see, but mold spores act like seeds and form new mold growth colonies when they find the right combination of nutrients and moisture. Mold colonies can grow on many substances, including wood, paper, carpet, insulation and food. Since the ideal temperature for

mold growth is between 60 and 86 degrees Fahrenheit, homes are the perfect location for a metropolis of mold growth, said Josh Anderson, production manager for the Greenwood SERVPRO office.

SERVPRO is a national company that offers services for building cleanup and restoration, including mold mitigation and remediation.

Another Greenwood company, McWhorter Cleaning and Contracting Service, also handles mold removal; however, a representative could not be reached by press time.

Locally, Anderson said he sees mold most often in crawl spaces underneath the house, but ducts, carpets and dry wall are also common culprits.

"We see it all the time," he said. "The houses today are sealed a lot tighter than they used to be. The best temperature for mold to grow is 60 to 80 degrees. With people wanting to be more comfortable, they're providing the perfect atmosphere for mold to grow."

"Any time you see some sort of growth on the wall or you have a musty smell, it's never too early to call."

Although proper mold remediation can be expensive, Anderson warned against "quick-fix" home remedies such as spraying bleach on the mold.

"The biggest problem we have with people trying to do it themselves is they spread the spores," he said. "When they're spraying or scrubbing, they make the mold spores become airborne. Then those spores can go through the heating and air-conditioning systems and get everywhere in the house."

"It can be dangerous stuff, and you never know what kind it is."

Once the mold gets into the ducts, it increases not only the health risk, but also the removal cost.

"We've done removal where we've cleaned duct lines, but sometimes you just have to replace them," Anderson said. "Every single job is 100 percent different from the last job."

The best way to limit mold damage to personal health and property is to routinely check the home, Anderson said.

"You should be checking your attic, the crawl spaces. Check behind your washing machine every now and then for leaks," he said. "With the proper conditions, it only takes 48 to 72 hours for mold to start growing. There's not a lot you can do to prevent it other than keep maintenance on your home."

"The big thing is, as soon as you notice something, go ahead and call."

When people try to clean up mold themselves, they often make the problem worse because they spread the spores.

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Quickly drying out water damage is also important, Anderson said, especially in carpets where padding can hold moisture. Other advice he offered was to keep heating- and cooling-system filters changed to prevent buildup and keep ducts clean.

To reduce moisture in your home, replace rubber washing-machine hoses with steel mesh lines and leave space between large objects like entertainment centers and the wall for air circulation. Running bathroom exhaust fans and using dehumidifiers can also help prevent moisture.

Once someone sees or smells mold in the home, the first step is to

have an industrial hygienist test the mold to find out what kind it is and what levels are present in the home, Anderson said.

"In every room of every house, there are mold spores. Whether or not the levels are elevated is what you should be concerned about," he said.

"Depending on what kind of mold it is, it can range from not very harmful to deadly, so there's a big gray area. You might see something in your basement for 20 years and it never harms you, or something can come up in a couple of days and (cause health problems).

"We have calls all the time with, 'Ever since I've no-

ticed this, I can't stop coughing.'"

Some molds are more hazardous than others because they produce chemical compounds call mycotoxins, but all indoor mold growth is potentially harmful, according to DHEC.

"Regardless of what kind of mold it is, we usually tell people that it needs to be removed and the problem that causes it, which is usually water, needs to be remediated," Webster said. "Anything that affects your health is serious, so if you think you have a problem with it, you do need to contact a professional and get it looked at."

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