

What is mould?

Mould is a type of fungus that grows in moist or humid places. It occurs naturally in the environment and can be found almost anywhere, including in garden composts and on decaying or damp organic material, and food. Indoors, mould grows best in damp and poorly ventilated areas, typically on wood, plasterboard, tile grout and furnishings. Common causes of mould growth indoors include:

- leaking roofs and walls,
- faulty plumbing, and
- condensation.

To reproduce, mould produces tiny particles called spores. These spores travel easily through the air and may begin to grow and spread when they land on damp surfaces.

Mould is not always easy to recognise. It often looks like ‘fuzz’ or may appear 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 and can also change colour depending on its age or life-stage.

How am I exposed to mould?

Mould spores and fragments exist naturally in the air we breathe. The amount that people are exposed to depends on various factors including the season, surrounding land, wind, and people’s activities / actions both indoors and outdoors.

Mould primarily enters your body through breathing and swallowing.

Some moulds produce toxins (mycotoxins). People are mostly exposed to mycotoxins through eating contaminated food. Australia minimises exposure to mycotoxins in the community by maintaining a hygienic food supply chain.

How can mould affect my health?

Breathing in mould spores and fragments can trigger nasal congestion, sneezing, coughing or wheezing, and respiratory infections. It can also worsen asthma and allergic conditions. Contact with mould can also irritate eyes and skin.

People who are more likely to experience these symptoms include those with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma or lung diseases. These people are also more susceptible to other serious health effects, such as the lung condition aspergillosis (‘Farmer’s lung’).

There is no exposure limit or health guideline value for exposure to mould. Where possible, exposure to mould should be minimised – this is particularly recommended for people who are more sensitive to mould exposure.

If you are concerned about any symptoms you are experiencing, seek medical advice. In the case of a life-threatening emergency, phone 000.

How do I minimise my exposure to mould?

Although mould naturally occurs in the environment and can be found almost anywhere, it needs damp surfaces and moisture to grow. You can reduce your exposure through simple measures, however there is no practical way to eliminate all exposure to mould. These measures include:

Indoors

- Prevent moisture and dampness and ensure adequate ventilation. This will minimise current and future mould growth.
- Fix leaky plumbing, roofs or other building faults.
- Clear and maintain gutters.
- Reduce and remove condensation (e.g. use exhaust fans and wipe up excess water).

Homes with inadequate ventilation resulting from poor design, modifications or lack of maintenance may be more prone to developing mould. The cheapest and easiest way of reducing indoor moisture and humidity is by ventilating a room by opening a door or window.

Food

- Throw away foods that have become visibly mouldy.
- Adequately clean the surface area on which the mouldy food was stored or consider throwing away the container the food was stored in.

Outdoors

- Use appropriate personal protective equipment such as gloves and a P1 or P2 face mask when handling garden composts, mulch, straw or hay, and mouldy and decaying organic materials.

How do I remove mould from my home?

Generally, if you can see or smell mould (often a dirty or earthy smell), you need to clean it up as mould can damage surfaces it grows on and affect your health. You should also try to find and control the source of the mould and/or dampness so that it won't recur after cleaning.

If you have decided to remove mould yourself, make sure there is good ventilation and wear protective clothing. For example, wear a shower cap and use gloves, eye protection, overalls, suitable footwear, and a P1 or P2 face mask.

Household detergent or white vinegar is usually sufficient to clean the mould. Use a microfibre cloth and rinse the dirty cloth regularly in a separate container of clean water to prevent spreading the mould. Do not dry brush the mouldy area, as the brush can flick spores into the air where they may be breathed in. Contaminated soft furnishings are difficult to clean and may need to be thrown away.

If there are large areas of mould or mould regrowth, consult a mould remediation professional. Some mould is not visible as it might be in a roof space, behind a wall or under floor coverings, so you may need to consult a professional if you can smell but can't see it.

Should I test for mould in my home?

Where mould is visible, it is generally not considered necessary to test for it in the home. In general, we do not recommend testing for mould at all because there are no health guideline values for which to compare test results to. This means that test results cannot be used to determine if a health risk exists. Mould is everywhere, so if you go testing for it, you will find it.

In summary, dampness and mould related problems should be prevented. When they occur, they should be rectified – remove mould where present, find it when you smell it, repair and control sources of excessive moisture – this is the best approach to controlling potential health risks.

Where do I go for more information or advice?

- **Your local doctor or Nurse on Call** in your state – if you feel unwell
- **Your local Council or State Health Department** (Environmental Health Section) – for ways to prevent/reduce mould growth and advice on its removal
- **Occupational Hygienist** – for consultancy services at a fee to remove mould, locate the mould by inspection (if you can smell, but can't see it), or to find a solution.
- **Your insurance company** – after a flood
- **The relevant Tenants Union** in your state – for rental properties
- **The relevant Consumer Affairs Authority** in your state
- **The relevant Domestic building complaints / dispute resolution service** in your state