Preventing and Correcting Mold Problems in Your Home

The weather in Wilmington is getting wetter and warmer, which helps to create an ideal breeding ground for mold in your home. Following are steps homeowners can take to prevent mold from growing and what to do in case a mold problem is discovered.

What is mold?

Mold is a type of fungus. It is part of a group of living organisms that are very common and serve an important role in the environment. However, mold can grow on bread and other types of food, making it unfit to eat. Mold can grow on the walls, floors and ceilings of your home as well as on your personal possessions. People often refer to some household molds as mildew, although the term also can apply to molds found outdoors.

How can I prevent mold from growing in my home?

While mold spores are all around us, mold growth can be prevented. Mold growing in your home requires moisture, warmth and food. Depriving mold of any of these three items will stop it from growing, but it will not kill the mold that is already there. Mold spores will remain dormant, and if the moisture, warmth and food all reappear, mold will begin to grow again.

The most important steps in controlling mold growth are to clean any existing mold and to eliminate excessive moisture. You can take numerous precautionary steps such as:

- Vacuum and clean regularly to remove possible sources of mold growth. Pay special attention to bathrooms and other areas of your home that are likely to generate a lot of moisture.
- In portions of your home that are susceptible to moisture, use area rugs or washable floor surfaces rather than wall-to-wall carpeting. If you use area rugs, launder them periodically.
- Do not store materials such as paper, books, clothes or other possible sources of food for mold in humid parts of your home.
- Repair water leaks in your roof, windows or any other part of the home as soon as possible.
- Clean refrigerator drip pans regularly according to the manufacturer's instructions. If your refrigerator and freezer doors do not seal properly, moisture can build up and lead to mold growth. Remove any mold on the door gaskets and replace faulty gaskets.
- Make sure that your gutters and downspouts are clear of debris that may block the flow of water from your roof. Make sure the area under your downspouts and other areas around your homes are properly graded so that rainwater from the roof flows away from your foundation. Splash blocks can help rainwater to flow in the proper direction. If necessary, extend your downspouts.
- Do not put gardens or plants too close to your foundation so that watering them could cause water to flow toward your house. If you water your lawn with a sprinkler, make sure the water does not hit your house or the area next to the foundation.
- In the kitchen and bathroom, open windows or use exhaust fans when engaging in activities that produce moisture. Exhaust fans should be vented to the outdoors and not to an attic or crawl space.
- If you have a clothes dryer, make sure it is vented to the outdoors.
- If you use a humidifier, make sure it does not produce an excessive amount of humidity. During the summer, 60 percent relative humidity or lower probably will prevent condensation and mold growth in most parts of the country. For winter, 40 percent relative humidity or lower will prevent condensation on windows.
- If you live in a house with a basement, consider using a dehumidifier there. The cool basement floor and walls can be a source of moisture build-up.
- If your home has an attic, make sure it is properly insulated and ventilated.

- If you have a crawl space under your house, cover the soil in the crawl space with waterproof polyethylene plastic. If your crawl space is ventilated, close the vents in the summer and keep them open in the winter.
- If you have water problems in your basement or crawl space, clean up affected areas as quickly as possible and take immediate steps to resolve the source of the problem.

How can I get rid of mold problems in my home?

After you have addressed any water and humidity problems with your home, you then can work on removing mold. If you need to clean a large area of mold in your home, keep the following precautions in mind.

- When handling or cleaning moldy materials and cleaning solutions, wear protective gloves and eye goggles, and dress in long sleeves and pants that can be easily removed in the work area and laundered.
- Minimize exposure to mold spores by using a respirator designed for particle removal for protection against inhaling mold spores. Respirators can be purchased from hardware stores. Be advised that such respirators will not protect you from fumes.
- Make sure the room is properly ventilated while you are cleaning; bleach solutions are irritating to the eyes, nose and throat.
- Start by trying to remove a small amount of mold to determine if you will have a health reaction to either the mold or the cleaning products. If you have a reaction, or if your home has so much mold that you cannot manage the cleanup on your own, contact a professional experienced in cleaning mold in homes. You also may need to hire a professional if mold is growing in an area such as ductwork or a crawlspace that is difficult to access.
- Make sure you prevent the spores and mold-contaminated dust from going into other parts of your home by hanging plastic sheeting to separate the area.
- Place the moldy items, cleaning rags and anything else that comes in contact with the mold in airtight plastic trash bags. Seal the bags before disposing of them.
- When you finish cleaning, immediately wash the clothing you were wearing in the hottest water possible.

If your home experiences a water-related problem, clean and dry any wet or damp areas as soon as you find them. If you live in a rental property, immediately report water problems to your landlord. The earlier you can detect the growth of mold in your home, the better a chance you have to control it. Early detection and treatment are very important. If you smell a musty odor in your house, start looking for the source immediately and remove it as soon as you find it. Prevention and early detection may save you from paying much greater cleanup and repair expenses later on. If you own your home, damage from mold and the cost of removing it might not be covered by your homeowner insurance. Read your policy or call your insurance agent to find out.