

# The Sensible Environmentalist

## Can Mold Make You Sick?

**DEAR DR. MOORE:**  
**Is it true that mold can cause serious health problems?**

Certain people seem to be sensitive to mold, and report health problems that range from rashes to asthma attacks, lung infections, even neurological damage. But while the science is inconclusive, Hurricane Katrina



**Dr. Moore**

has done a lot to raise the profile of the issue. With mold growing on practically every surface touched by the floodwaters, people are understandably concerned about potential health effects over the short and long term.

It's important to point out that there are literally millions of different types of mold spores, most of which are known to be harmless. Mold has the potential to grow in the air, water and on pretty well any surface—providing there's moisture, oxygen, a food source and moderate temperature.

Water that penetrates cracked siding can cause mold, as can a leaky roof or window, a bathtub that doesn't drain properly, or a washing machine that overflows. The signs may be subtle, such as a musty/earthy smell, stains on ceiling tiles or walls, or speckled walls around plumbing or tile. If you're susceptible, even many of the health effects—such as a rash or cough—can easily be

blamed on other things, which is why some people become very sick before receiving proper treatment.

The best way to deal with mold is to prevent it in the first place. Control moisture by repairing damaged siding, fixing leaks, and making sure that bathrooms, dryers and other sources of moisture are ventilated to the outdoors. Use air conditioners and de-humidifiers, and add insulation to reduce the potential for condensation on cold surfaces. Damp surfaces and furnishings should always be dried within 48 hours.

What is certain is that mold can cause damage to your home—which isn't covered by most insurance policies—so getting rid of it makes sense. Clean minor growth on hard surfaces with a solution of chlorine and detergent or a borate-based detergent. (Porous items like carpets will likely have to be discarded). Wear a respirator, gloves, goggles and long sleeves, and start with a small area to make sure you don't have an allergic reaction. If the problem is extensive or hard to reach, call a professional. And, of course, if you develop any health problems that might be related, see a doctor.

*Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to [Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com](mailto:Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com)*