

SCHOOL HAZARD FACTS FOR FAMILIES

UNITE FOR A MOLD-FREE SCHOOL

If families and school staff work together, mold-free schools are more likely and all will benefit. See the *Unite for Healthy Schools* factsheet for how to do this.

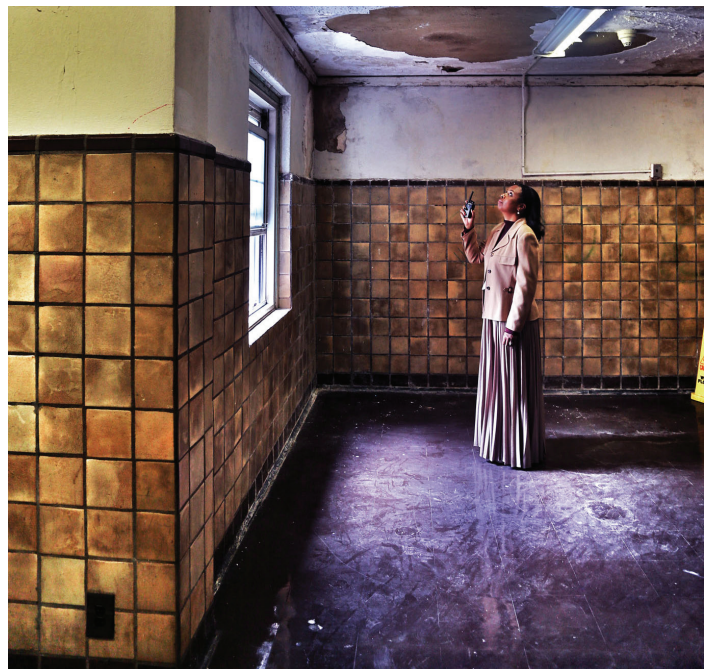
Molds are forms of fungi found both indoors and outdoors and people are exposed to them daily in the air we breathe. While molds play an important role in nature, by breaking down organic matter such as toppled trees, fallen leaves and dead animals, they can also be destructive to the structure of buildings and hazardous to health.

Sometimes molds grow excessively inside schools because of leaks, floods, high humidity and condensation. When mold is present in a building, teaching, learning and even health are likely to suffer. Although many people will have no reaction at all when exposed to mold, others, including those with respiratory problems such as allergies or asthma, weakened immune systems and children, may feel the effects of mold. Staff and students may complain of: nasal or sinus congestion, sneezing, cough, shortness of breath, headache, and watery, reddened or burning eyes. Most health problems are temporary and can be controlled by limiting exposure to molds.

MOLD CAN BE VISIBLE OR HIDDEN

Mold grows where there is water, moisture, or high humidity as long as organic material, air and moisture are present. Molds can be any color, including white, orange, green, brown or black.

Sometimes mold is visible. Other times it is hidden under flooring and carpeting, behind sheetrock, wallpaper or paneling, in cabinets with plumbing and



inside ventilation systems. You may suspect hidden mold if you smell musty or earthy smells which indicates mold is growing nearby. Mold may grow where there has been water damage and when any building material or furnishing is damp for more than 48 hours.

MOLD PROTECTIVE MEASURES AND PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE

“Clean and dry” is the key to preventing mold growth. All unwanted water entry problems should be permanently fixed, including roofs, leaking plumbing and window frames, seeping foundations and exterior walls, and condensation from air conditioning. Unless the source of water, moisture or high humidity is removed or fixed, mold will grow back even after removal.

Staff can take common sense measures, such as: checking regularly and identifying condensation, wet spots and stained ceiling tiles, reporting signs of water leaks or mold to school administration, cleaning and drying any wet or damp spots within 48 hours and before mold growth, discarding wet materials and furnishings, maintaining indoor relative humidity below 60% and ideally between 30% and 50%.

Families can look for leaks, stained ceiling tile, mold growth and musty smells on back to school night, at parent teacher conferences, during PTA meetings or whenever they enter the building.

While a new roof and other changes to the structure of the building (repointing bricks, changing windows and grading landscaping away from the building) may be tough to obtain because they require funding, staff and families should strive for them as long term and permanent solutions.

TESTING FOR MOLD

Testing for mold is very expensive and is most often unnecessary. Money is better spent on building maintenance and other necessary items in the school budget. Background information, observations and the history of the school is essential to determine the location and extent of a mold problem, as well as identifying what needs to be fixed.

MOLD REMOVAL

Proper mold removal is a complex process aimed not only at removing the mold but also at preventing

release of large amounts of mold into the air during removal. More than 100 square feet of removal should be undertaken in a highly regulated manner – like an asbestos removal. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has guidelines for removal which can be found on their website (www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/).

Killing mold with biocides or chlorine is not good enough because dead mold is still an allergen. Mold must be physically removed. Mold on hard, non-porous surfaces may be cleaned with detergent and water, but it is very difficult to remove mold from porous materials such as ceiling tiles. These materials may need to be discarded.

LAWS THAT APPLY

There currently are no standards or nationally recognized guidelines limiting exposure to mold or how to safely remove it.

The Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) 2007 Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Standard offers limited mold protection. It requires that school districts promptly repair water leaks and dry, replace, remove, or clean damp or wet materials within 48 hours of discovery.

PEOSH can only be utilized by school employees, not students and their families. So families should work through school staff and their unions to see if they want to involve PEOSH. Families should call the Healthy Schools Now Coalition phone number listed below for direct help with mold concerns and any other health and safety organizing issues.

This factsheet is one of a series prepared for the Healthy Schools Now Coalition by the New Jersey Work Environment Council, 7 Dunmore Ave., First Floor East, Ewing, NJ 08618 (609) 882-6100. Website at: <http://www.njwec.org/healthyschoolsnow.cfm>. Funded in part by the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.

Healthy Schools Now is a coalition of parents, educators, students and public school advocates dedicated to ensuring that all New Jersey children and school employees learn and work in safe, modern school buildings.

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