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What are the signs of mold growth in a property and what should be done to fix the problem?

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The numbers are telling - according to the Insurance Information Institute, mold-related claims in the commercial setting accounted for \$1.3 billion in pay-out in the short time-span between 2001 and 2003, and while more recent figures are not available, it's a sure bet that the cost of mold continues to escalate in office buildings and commercial properties.

Simply stated, molds emit microscopic spores that quickly reproduce. These spores float through indoor and outdoor air continually, and when they land on a damp indoor spot, they grow and subsequently digest whatever they attach themselves to...that's how they survive. Wood, carpet, paper, food - mold spores don't discriminate where they live and when excessive moisture accumulates, mold growth can quickly get out of hand.

In addition to visible mold, warning signs that mold exist include:

*Discoloration or water stains: Yellow stains on walls and ceilings indicate moisture, the breeding ground of mold, but green, brown or black stains are almost certain to be caused by mold.

*Cracked and peeling paint: This is often a sign that moisture has built up behind the paint, allowing for an environment for mold growth.

*Warped wood: Damaged wood normally indicates the existence of water or moisture within a building and if severe enough, can eventually lead to mold.

Be advised that a musty odor can be the first indicator of mold growth. Molds, by their very nature, produce volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and sometimes more serious toxins as byproducts of their metabolism. These VOCs typically evaporate at room temperature, creating a musty odor. VOCs are generally not harmful however toxins do not evaporate as easily as VOCs and can be quite dangerous to humans. Regardless of whether a VOC or toxin, that first waft of musty odor is a sure indicator of mold...and mold has numerous adverse health effects, including allergic reactions, asthma and other respiratory ailments.

Once mold is discovered in a commercial dwelling, a remediation plan is an immediate must as such a proactive approach will greatly reduce the overall cost of returning a building to a healthy state.

The purpose of mold remediation is to correct the moisture problem, eradicate mold that has formed inside walls and to remove those moldy and contaminated materials that are causing physical or structural damage - this mitigation process will serve to prevent human exposure and further damage to building materials and furnishings. Killing mold chemically is not enough; the mold must be removed; even when mold is dead, enough proteins exist to cause adverse reactions in humans. A comprehensive remediation plan should include measures to contain and remove all affected materials to prevent further contamination.

It should be noted that the use of a biocide, such as chlorine bleach, is not recommended as a means of mold remediation. Although toxic to mold, biocides - which parenthetically cease working once they come in contact with a surface - can be equally harmful to humans and animals.

Depending on the size, scope and severity of the mold infestation, remediation plans will vary greatly. For well contained areas, the use of wet and HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) vacuums may do the trick, but many building owners and property managers prefer to hire outside assistance to perform cleanup. Should you choose that route, make sure the contractor has experience with mold remediation, is a certified mold removal contractor and maintains the proper licensing for material removal.

And if there is even the slightest suspicion that the building's HVAC system has been contaminated by mold turn the system off and contact a properly trained and licensed mold removal specialist without hesitation. Take heed that mold contamination can spread throughout a building if an HVAC system contaminated by mold remains in use.

Remediators should always follow OSHA standards and IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification) protocol. In addition to proper moisture mitigation and safe mold removal, the highest priority of a mold remediation program is to protect building occupants and those performing remediation.

Great measures should be taken by remediators to avoid exposing themselves to mold spores and mold-laden dust during the cleanup process. When possible, remediation should be conducted during hours when the building is unoccupied; however if the scope of the cleanup is sizeable, it would be wise to relocate occupants for the duration of the remediation.

Remediators should avoid exposure to mold-laden dusts as they conduct their cleanup activities. Caution should be used to prevent mold and mold spores from being dispersed throughout the air where they can be inhaled by building occupants. In some cases, especially those involving large areas of contamination, the remediation plan may include temporary relocation of some or all of the building occupants.

As a property manager or building owner, it's best to be aware of the potential for problems before they become more serious. Prevention is often the best medicine.

Bob Bowen is a principal at Indoor Environmental, Marshfield, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540