



Health and Safety  
Santé et sécurité

# HAZARD Mould

## What is mould?

Moulds are microorganisms that can grow on virtually any indoor or outdoor substance, as long as moisture, oxygen and an organic source are present. In nature, they play an important role in breaking down organic matter, like fallen leaves, plants and dead animals. But in our workplaces, mould can be a significant health hazard.

Of the over 100,000 mould species in the world, about 1,000 are commonly found in Canada.

## How does mould affect workers' health?

As part of its reproductive cycle, mould produces thousands of tiny particles called spores. When disturbed by air movement or contact, it releases these spores into the air. Inhaling spores, mould or mould fragments can affect your health or worsen certain health conditions.

In dry conditions, mould goes dormant but can still spread spores and fragments into the air. When moisture returns, it can reactivate.

Some moulds create and release mycotoxins, which slowly wear down the immune system and can lead to allergic or respiratory problems. Workers exposed to mould can have different symptoms. Some may have no reaction at all. The most common effects of mould exposure are:

- Irritation to the skin, eyes, nose and throat
- Burning in the nose, nosebleeds
- Difficulty breathing, asthmatic attacks

- Watery eyes and runny nose
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Impairment of the immune system

In some cases, long-term exposure to aflatoxin, a toxic compound produced by certain moulds, causes lung and liver cancer.

People with weakened immune systems are particularly susceptible to mould-related illnesses and should avoid being exposed to it whenever possible.

## Identifying mould hazards

Mould sampling and a survey of symptoms can be done in collaboration with the employer, subject to the union's active participation. If the employer resists the idea or denies the existence of mould, the local should consider their strategy, including contacting the union.

Visual inspection is the most reliable way to identify mould problems. It involves checking the following for signs of water damage, such as discolouration and staining:

- carpeting and flooring
- fabric on and underneath furniture
- ceiling tiles and drywall
- behind furniture
- surfaces with standing water, like sinks, kitchens, air conditioners, etc.



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Mould can appear as dark spots or patches of any colour and have textures ranging from woolly to slimy. Since it thrives in dark, moist environments, it may be hidden from view. Dormant mould often looks dry, powdery or crusty.

## Preventing workplace mould

Your employer must provide a healthy and safe workplace. This includes ensuring that all workers are protected from the health risks of mould hazards, which often result from cutbacks or employer neglect.

The following can help prevent workplace mould:

- Keep the relative humidity between 30 and 60 per cent.
- Conduct regular and thorough inspections, particularly in sewage treatment plants and composting facilities.
- Make sure landscaping and eavestrough downspouts direct water away from buildings.
- Ensure any high-moisture areas are properly ventilated with local exhaust ventilation that captures and directs moisture outside.
- Insulate cold surfaces to prevent condensation on pipes, windows, walls, roofs and floors.
- Regularly maintain and clean heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems.
- Regularly maintain buildings, especially roofs, basements and anywhere else with leaks.
- Maintain and repair plumbing systems and building leaks.

## Addressing mould in your workplace

If you discover mould in your workplace, report it to management immediately. If the problem is not promptly rectified, contact your health and safety committee for assistance.

Fixing a mould problem includes identifying and correcting the conditions that promote its growth and safely removing materials it has damaged. While the cleaning and removal process may depend on the size and type of mould growth, the extent of the damage and the location, appropriate personal protective equipment must always be used.

Only trained professionals, with certification, should sample, analyze and remove mould.

If your employer refuses to deal with mould, you may need to:

- Contact your union
- Formally notify your health and safety committee
- Consider filing a formal complaint
- Check the relevant collective agreements, regulations, legislation and appropriate standard to consider your options.
- You may need to exercise your right to refuse work to protect your own health.