Mold — a living liability to property and health

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In the last few years, commercial building owners and homeowners alike have sought relief from an invasion of mold inside their buildings. Mold on building surfaces used to mean unpleasant odors, unsightly appearances and the possibility of deteriorating building materials. Today its presence has quickly become the newest indoor air quality health concern.

Mold has always been with us. Some mold is expected in even the best kept buildings. Mold spores drift with the wind and are carried into our buildings on our clothing and on the feet of pets and vermin. Mold grows where it can feed and get enough moisture. Cellulose-based building materials like sheet rock, paper and ceiling tiles are particularly vulnerable to mold growth when they get wet. They will never dry completely enough to be inhospitable to mold once it has started growing.

Mold's effect on health is being noted nationwide. One of the effects, an allergic reaction, is fairly easy to spot. Mold related health effects can also come from a growing list of symptoms caused by mold-produced toxins. Although the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has taken the stand that there's no direct evidence linking the mold *Stachybotrys chartarum* with the deaths of several infants, it's still considered one of several potentially toxic molds affecting occupants of both commercial buildings and private homes. Other molds targeted as health concerns by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other agencies include: *Aspergillus, Penicillium, Fusarium* and *Trichoderma*.

A general rule of thumb in assessing mold contamination is: the mold level in the air inside should be less than the level outside. (Buildings with mechanical ventilation systems typically see significantly lower levels inside.) Increases in total spores or increases in a particular species indicates an indoor source, meaning that somewhere in the building, mold is growing and spreading its spores. That's when an investigation into potential water intrusion must be made to determine its source. From our experience, the most common source of mold has come from roof leaks, broken pipes or flooding. Unfortunately, mold spores aren't always visible. They can be concealed inside wall cavities or behind molding strips and their toxins can still be felt by occupants.

Cleanup of large areas of mold-damaged materials requires techniques similar to those used by the asbestos industry — personal protection for the workers, air filtration and proper disposal of contaminated materials. Mold, unlike asbestos, can grow back if the remediation is insufficient or done carelessly. It's a living organism that will continue to reproduce as long as building conditions permit. Improper handling can actually spread the spores, making the problem worse. The goal of mold remediation is to correct the cause and remove the damaged materials that have supported excessive growth. This will return the building to a level of airborne mold that is consistent with the outside. Perhaps most importantly, allow occupants to work and live without fear of damage to their health.