

MOLD

On a recent day at a Home Depot store in east Cobb County, not one dehumidifier was in stock. A salesman said customers had been snapping them up and that hundreds had been purchased by people who'd driven from Florida to haul the machines down there. Home Depot spokeswoman Jen King, said, "We are having shortages across the country of dehumidifiers, but we're getting more in. Since June, it's been really tough."

The story's the same at other big chain operations. "There's been a run," says Gene McLeod, Sears store manager at Cumberland Mall. "We close to doubled sales of last October. People complain about a musty smell or damp feeling."

Lowe's spokeswoman Jennifer Smith says the chain's 15 or so stores in metro Atlanta mostly have some dehumidifiers, but it's been tough keeping up with demand. Wal-Mart's Suzanne Haney says the chain has sold so many "we have a shortage" but that "from now on, though this has been a seasonal item, we're going to stock them year-round."

"There's been a big gigantic sucking sound for finding ways to take everything mold-related away," says Henry Slack, an engineer for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "And if it rains, then home humidities just build up. And you get more mold." He says mold complaints have been surging.

Kelly Reynolds, a scientist at the University of Arizona who recently completed a study on mold, found that:

- 100 percent of homes tested contained spores, though 83 percent of people say mold isn't a problem in their houses.
- A third of consumers who clean for mold use soap and water, which is ineffective, and 36 percent think they've killed mold if it can't be seen.
- Mold spores are suspected in the tripling of the asthma rate in the past 20 years.
- A chlorine bleach solution can kill mold and neutralize indoor mold allergens.

"We believe it [mold] is a major factor in illnesses," says Reynolds, a microbiologist whose study was published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology. "We know that early exposure can lead to worse symptoms of allergy and asthma later in life."

Short of spending thousands of dollars to rip out mold-infested areas, solutions include buying dehumidifiers and trying to make sure that indoor

environments are well-ventilated. Crawl spaces can be fitted with fans and hard surfaces treated with bleach.

Whatever you do, check the “remediation” companies out and get references, says Warner McConaughy, owner of HammerSmith Renovation in Atlanta. And keep in mind there’s a lot you can do for yourself.

“But there’s no magic bullet,” he says. “Get different opinions and estimates. And remember: Mold is everywhere.”

Guide to Mold

What It Is...

- Mold is a fungus. The “seeds,” called spores, are spread by the wind outdoors and by air indoors. Some are released in dry, windy weather. Some are released with the fog or dew when humidity is high. Mold spore counts go way up at this time of year, since mold thrives in dead and decaying plants. But allergic symptoms from fungus spores are most common from July to late summer. About half of folks with allergies are allergic to mold. And mold is considered a top trigger for asthma.

Mold Facts...

- Mold may be invisible to the eye or look like furry growth, black stains or specks of black, white, orange, green or brown on surfaces.
- One mold has colonized; it can reveal itself as discolored patches or cottony, speckled growth on walls. Large infestations usually can be seen or smelled.
- Water leaks or an earthy or musty odor can be good indications of a potential mold problem
- To grow, spores need a food source, a warm environment and moisture. Most homes offer an ample food supply-drywall, wood insulation or paper. When these materials become damp or wet, settled spores can quickly colonize.
- There’s no scientific difference between mold and mildew.
- Black mold gets a bad rap. Only one black mold produces neurotoxins that can affect the brain. It’s a different kind of bug,

- growing in drywall and porous surfaces. It likes to grow in humidity above 70 percent.
- People with pre-existing respiratory conditions, weakened immune systems, such as individuals with HIV infection, cancer, infants and young children, and the elderly are all at higher risk when exposed to mold.
 - Nobody knows how many houses are infected with mold, but the consensus is, it's close to 100 percent, especially in humid regions like the South.
 - There's evidence that bleach can kill it, but not all of it. Bleach can be a temporary solution to making the green stuff disappear.
 - When new homes are built, most of the wood is infected with mold.
 - Having your home just checked for mold can run from \$200 to over \$500.
 - Insurers paid \$2.5 billion in mold-related claims under home-owner policies in 2002, up from \$1.3 billion in 2001. Rising mold claims cause higher insurance rates.

How To Fight Mold...

- Maintain indoor relative humidity between 35 percent to 50 percent.
- Fix leaking pipes immediately and prevent water from intruding into your house.
- Use exhaust fans to increase bathroom and kitchen ventilation. Use air conditioning or dehumidifiers during the summer months and at times of high humidity, like the fall.
- Do not carpet bathrooms or basements
- Clean hard surfaces regularly with a bleach-based product that has been proved to kill mold.
- Clean your gutters.
- Connect extension hoses to gutter spouts to make sure rainwater shoots away from your house.
- If you have a low spot near your foundation where water gathers, fill it up.
- Install vapor barriers in crawl space with plastic sheeting.
- Use dehumidifiers-at least one. Keep in mind these machines use a lot of electricity.
- Consider installing a French drain, designed to take water away from your house.
- Seal concrete or cement block walls.

- Consider installing a fan ventilation system in your crawl space.
- Make sure existing vents aren't covered.
- Use an exhaust fan in a bathroom for several minutes after a shower or bath. Use exhaust fans when cooking, and make sure they're vented to the outside-same for dryer vents.
- Soap and water do not effectively eliminate mold. While they can remove the mold stains, they do so by moving around the spores. The microscopic spores that remain can be invisible to the eye, yet are capable of quickly recolonizing.

Cited from the Atlanta Journal Constitution; Bill Hendrick (author)