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Health Protection Division of the  
York Region Community and Health  
Services Department  
[www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)

## **INDOOR AIR QUALITY AND MOULD**

### **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ABOUT MOULD**

#### **What is mould?**

Moulds are fungi. Fungi are present almost everywhere in indoor and outdoor environments. They thrive in areas where it is wet or damp. Fungi are highly adapted to grow and reproduce, rapidly generating spores in the process. Mould growth can affect air quality adversely as the spores that are dispersed into the air may be inhaled. As well, many types of mould can produce mycotoxins, which are fungal metabolites. These toxins may be harmful to health if they are inhaled, swallowed or come in contact with skin.

#### **Where does mould grow?**

Mould requires appropriate moisture levels, temperature and nutrients for it to grow. If areas are kept dry, mould cannot grow. High moisture levels can occur when water enters from the outside through the floor, walls or roof. High moisture also can result from plumbing leaks and activities that are conducted in the indoor environment (e.g. such as showering without ventilation). Mould thrives on cellulose-based materials such as dry wall, cardboard or any wood based product. Mouldy smells from carpets, walls and floors are a sign that they may contain mould. The presence of mould growth, water damage, or a musty /mildew odour should be addressed immediately.

#### **Can mould affect the health of children?**

Human exposure to mould can occur in different ways. It can be a result of direct physical contact with mould or by inhalation or ingestion of its spores or fungal metabolites. Whether or not symptoms develop depends on the nature of the fungal material, the amount of exposure, and the susceptibility of the exposed individual.

Respiratory symptoms in children that are exposed to mould can include persistent sneezing, eye irritation, rhinitis, coughing and wheezing.

Asthmatic children are especially at risk as mould may trigger asthma attacks.

#### **What are the most common symptoms?**

- Runny nose
- Eye irritation
- Headache
- Aggravation of asthma
- Cough
- Congestion
- Fatigue

## **What can you do if there are students with illnesses that appear to be related to indoor air quality and/or mould?**

Currently, there is insufficient data to establish threshold levels of exposure to mould. Based on the information of an expert panel, the Ontario Ministry of Health (1999) concluded that exposure to low levels of mould at school or at home may not produce serious symptoms in most people.

The symptoms associated with mould are non-specific and could arise from a variety of medical conditions or other indoor air contaminants. Some factors associated with poor indoor air quality that also could generate symptoms similar to mould include poor air circulation/ventilation, allergens in settled dusts and off-gassing of chemicals from paint, carpeting and furnishings.

If children are experiencing symptoms such as nose and eye irritation, cough, congestion and an aggravation of asthma, they should see a physician who may make a referral to a medical specialist trained in occupational/environmental medicine.

The Health Protection Division of the York Region Community and Health Services Department is available to work with local school boards to conduct investigations regarding mould and other indoor air quality issues.

If you suspect there is a mould or an indoor air quality concern in a school, contact the Health and Safety Officer for your school board and York Region *Health Connection*.



### **Where can you get more information?**

Call York Region *Health Connection* at **1-800-361-5653** or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)