

Mold blamed for breathing problems

Insufficient evidence for other ills, study finds

Institute of Medicine [division of National Academy of Sciences] Tuesday, May 25, 2004
The study was financed by the U.S. Government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Respiratory problems, including some asthma, can be caused by mold, but an extensive study released Tuesday failed to indict the fungus for a host of other, often major illnesses that some have sought to associate with it.

"Even though the available evidence does not link mold or other factors associated with building moisture to all the serious health problems that some attribute to them, excessive indoor dampness is a widespread problem that warrants action at the local, state and national levels," said Noreen Clark, dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan.

Clark headed an Institute of Medicine panel that studied the health effects of mold, which has drawn increased attention in recent years with the shutdown of a major hotel, delayed openings of schools in several states and a raft of lawsuits.

The Institute, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, said mold and building dampness do constitute a problem and urged it be corrected through a range of steps, including changes in how buildings are designed, constructed and maintained.

"An exhaustive review of the scientific literature made it clear to us that it can be very hard to tease apart the health effects of exposure to mold from all the other factors that may be influencing health in the typical indoor environment," said Clark.

"That said, we were able to find sufficient evidence that certain respiratory problems, including symptoms in asthmatics who are sensitive to mold, are associated with exposure to mold and damp conditions," she concluded.

Excessive dampness influences whether mold, as well as bacteria, dust mites and other such agents, are present and thrive indoors, the committee noted. In addition, the wetness may cause chemicals and particles to be released from building materials.

A rare ailment known as hypersensitivity pneumonitis also was associated with indoor mold exposure in susceptible people.

But the committee said it was unable to find evidence that mold is associated with fatigue, neuropsychiatry disorders or other health problems that some people have attributed to fungal infestations of buildings.

The little evidence that is available does not support an association, the committee said, but it added that because there are so few studies it cannot rule out a connection.

Molds that are capable of producing toxins do grow indoors, and toxic and inflammatory effects also can be caused by bacteria that flourish in damp conditions, the report noted.

The committee said information exists on how to control dampness but architects, engineers, building contractors, facility managers and maintenance staff do not always apply this knowledge.

The members called for development of guidelines for preventing indoor dampness and said they should be promoted nationally. In addition, building codes and regulations should be reviewed and modified as necessary to reduce moisture problems, the committee said.

Lawsuits claiming illnesses from mold in buildings that were not properly built or cleaned up have multiplied in recent years.

Changes in building codes in the 1970s to make homes more energy efficient and airtight had the effect of allowing less ventilation through a house that would dry out a wet wall or floor, which in turn may have led to more mold damage claims, according to attorneys involved in some cases.

The National Academy of Sciences is a private institution chartered by Congress to advise the government on scientific matters. The study was funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.