

Solutions Sheet
Neighborhood Inspections Team

Mold and Mildew complaints

Date: February 13, 2002

<p>Issue: If someone complains of mold and mildew, what authority or obligation do we have under Title 29 to cite this as a code violation?</p>
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<p>Background: Recent articles and events identifying mold as a possible health risk have increased public awareness. As a result, housing complaints citing mold have also been increasing. Approximately 5-10% of our Housing complaints are centered around mold and mildew depending on the time of year. Government standards and guidelines have not yet been developed regarding mold and mildew and the health risks or effects they have on the public. One hurdle is trying to determine the extent to which mold effects people. Different people are effected differently. Those with a higher susceptibility to allergies, those with asthma or lung disease or lower tolerance to external influences on the body will exhibit a quicker and stronger adverse reaction. More education and research is needed on the subject. OPDR has decided to contribute where it can by attending seminars, distributing information and acting as a resource. In addition, Title 29 states, 'Every dwelling...shall be maintained reasonably free from dampness to prevent conditions conducive to decay, mold growth or deterioration of the structure.'</p>
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Solution: Mold occurs when there is moisture!

When we receive a complaint we typically do a brief phone interview and if a Housing case is opened on the complaint, we will do a physical inspection of the property.

- A. When interviewing the complainant or interested party on the phone, we should ask the following questions:
1. Is the mold visible, and approximately how extensive? If there is no visible evidence of mold, the inspector will be unable to cite a code violation. A "moldy smell" is not a demonstration that molds exists. Neighborhood Inspections is not a testing laboratory. Testing for mold and mildew is a tricky process. There are many, many species of mold in existence. Although there is growing evidence that most can effect health some are more toxic that others. We do not have the authority or ability to make a determination about the type of mold or what its effects may be on the inhabitants.
 2. Has the complainant tried to clean the mold, and what effect has that had on it? In many cases, the mold can be cleaned off the effected area with a bleach solution. Many times, however, it will return before too long or even overnight. Typically this is indicative of a more extensive problem and the inside of the wall may be effected.
 3. If there is no visible sign of mold, there is usually no purpose in making an inspection of the property.
If we can't see it we can't cite it.
- B. Upon visiting the property, we observe some mold. How extensive does it have to be before we list it as a violation? This is an area where some inspector discretion is required.
1. If mold is visible in the metal window runners, for example, it would be difficult to justify listing a violation. You might suggest that they clean out the runners or drill a small weep hole in the outside track to allow the water to escape. Standing water is a good way to grow mold culture.

2. You might find mold in the corner of a closet or bedroom near the floor. Many times this has to do with a lack of air circulation. If there is no air movement in the corners and the residence is a bit humid, it is common to find mold in some corners, especially on outside walls or against concrete block walls that have a tendency to weep. Occasionally this can be remedied by exposing the area to circulated air, cracking the closet door a bit and keeping belongings stored away from the wall. You might also find mold behind curtains or furniture where air has a difficult time circulating. If it appears that the problem is on the surface and can be remedied with some cleaning and additional circulation, you might ask the occupant to try that first. If the problem persists, you can check back to see if you can find evidence of a more extensive moisture issue.
3. If the occupant is complaining of a moldy smell or illness associated with a suspicion of mold, there is not much we can do. We have no direct evidence that the issue is mold. Without such proof, we cannot call it as a violation. In some cases, the occupant will have received test results from a laboratory that demonstrate mold in the environment. Even these test results do not demonstrate a health hazard. Mold exists everywhere. Housing Inspectors are not trained to determine which mold is toxic and at what levels health is effected for an individual. If no mold is visible, only by direct evidence from an expert that a particular mold is effecting the occupant in a particular dwelling can we act.
4. If we do find mold, we can cite it as a health hazard under section 29.30.120 'Interior Dampness' or 29.30.140 'Cleanliness and Sanitation' and ask that the owner remedy it.

Here are some suggestions for remedies:

1. Wash the affected areas with a bleach solution and try to ventilate the area. (Usually the first line of defense.)
2. The occupant may wish to move from the premises if they feel their health may be effected.
3. Look for possible causes of moisture. You may find that the gutters or downspouts are disconnected, water may be draining against the house and keeping the area constantly wet. The siding or roofing may be damaged and allowing moisture to penetrate into the walls. The windows may not be sealed correctly, allowing moisture to penetrate. There could be a leaking pipe under the house, creating a constant moisture problem. **Mold occurs when there is moisture!**
4. The owner or occupant may wish to contact an "Industrial Hygienist." This profession seems to have the most practical knowledge in the field of indoor environmental hazards. They may recommend air testing or cleanup procedures or may find the root cause. The owner may also wish to contact the testing labs directly. The yellow pages list both categories.
5. Install a de-humidifier. Installation of a de-humidifier is recommended to remove moisture from indoor environments. An average house can produce roughly 2 gallons of water a day and in many cases, 6 or more gallons. De-humidifiers cost anywhere from \$100 and up, but come highly recommended.