



## Moisture and Building Materials

**The Problem:** Whether the result of a flood, leaky roof, or condensation, moisture can cause damage and support the growth of mold and mildew. Molds and mildew (an early stage of mold) are fungi and grow in moist environments. They are present indoors and outdoors and in the air around us, and feed on and help break down organic matter. That is why they like to grow on, and into, wood, paper, ceiling tiles (largely paper), wallpaper, drywall, fabrics and carpets. Molds also release spores (seeds) and vapors that can cause health effects, with some persons being more sensitive than others.

**Signs of Mold (and testing):** The presence of a moldy, musty smell, or visible mold on surfaces generally indicates actively growing mold. Mold can also be inactive if materials have dried out after mold started to grow on them, and start growing again once the moisture returns. Visible mold or musty odors are sufficient evidence to take action. In these cases there is no need to test for mold, but instead prompt elimination of the moldy materials and the source of moisture is indicated. Testing for mold is indicated only under very specific circumstances, based on the judgement of a trained occupational hygienist working with the building management team.

**The Solution:** Whether at work or at home, the solution to mold is to eliminate the moisture it needs to grow. If moisture cannot be eliminated, such as in a bathroom or other chronically damp area, then surfaces should be hard, non-porous and easy to clean.

If materials have been saturated, or there has been a flood, then aggressive measures must be taken to prevent the growth of mold. Any porous materials must be dried within 24-48 hours to prevent initial mold growth. Generally, saturated wall board must be removed, and the wall space may need to be opened and inspected for wet insulation, and ventilated to speed drying.

**Porous vs. Non-porous Materials:** Hard, non-porous materials are easier to dry and clean, and are less likely to support the growth of mold and mildew. Porous materials, or hard materials with organic matter on them, such as plaster or wallboard, not only support surface mold but may also have mold growing in them. That is why moldy materials that cannot be laundered or thoroughly cleaned and disinfected must be discarded.

**Sewage:** If sewage contaminated water has contacted or soaked porous materials, those materials must be either laundered (such as clothes or bedding) or discarded. Non-porous materials such as metal, glass, stone, tile, and vinyl flooring can be cleaned and disinfected with either a germicide or ten percent bleach solution.

## Resources: Who to Call?

Call the building management or [Facilities Services](#) to respond to leaks and water damage, or small amounts of surface mold. If mold is extensive or there are associated health effects, notify building management and contact EH&S at 206-543-7262 or [ehsdept@uw.edu](mailto:ehsdept@uw.edu).

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