

# Information on Mold and Moisture for Renters in California

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*This booklet describes the  
increased risks  
to health, including specific health  
effects, that may result from  
exposures to mold or  
dampness in buildings.*

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California Department of Public Health  
(CDPH) in accordance with the  
2001 Toxic Mold Protection Act  
(HSC §26148).*



# Health Effects of Mold and Moist Building Conditions

Living or working in moldy or moist buildings increases the risk of experiencing many harmful health effects, including:

- asthma attacks in those who already have asthma;
- a new asthma diagnosis;
- respiratory infections, such as bronchitis;
- breathing symptoms, such as hay fever, sneezing, stuffy nose, sore throat, wheezing, breathing difficulty, or cough; and
- eczema or skin rash.

There is strong scientific evidence that exposure to either dampness or mold increases these health risks. Mold can affect people differently. How much a person is affected depends on how sensitive they are and on how much they are exposed. Moldy and moist buildings are linked to health effects in both people with allergies and people without allergies.

## Signs of Moisture and Mold

Because of the harmful health effects linked to moisture and mold, it is important to keep homes dry and free of mold. The scientific evidence so far does not show a link between these health effects and the type, amount, or color of the mold present. Tests that identify the types of mold or the amounts of mold in buildings are not useful in telling us about the risks to health. This is *why CDPH does not recommend measuring mold spores or doing other microbiological tests* to decide if mold or moisture needs to be remediated, or fixed (we talk about *how* to do this below).

What we do know is that there are some signs of moisture and mold that are linked to health effects. These include:

- **visible mold**, such as mold on walls or ceilings, behind furniture or appliances, or under carpets, or even hidden in areas not seen in the occupied areas of homes;
- **mold odor**, noticed as an earthy, musty, or moldy smell;
- **visible water damage**, such as water- stains or discoloration on walls or ceilings, peeling or bubbled paint, warped floors, or rotting wood; and
- **moist or damp materials**, including condensation on windows or walls.

We do not have enough scientific evidence yet to tell us how much of these signs we need to see before we should take actions to protect health. But any *one* of these signs indicates increased health risks, and the more that *any* of them are present, the *greater the risk* of harmful health effects.

*If you can see mold, water damage, moisture, or smell mold, there is an increased risk to health.*

# Sources of Building Moisture that Can Allow Mold to Grow

The main ingredient that determines if mold can grow in a building is moisture. The moisture that is necessary for indoor mold to grow can come from many sources both inside and outside of a building.

Indoor sources include:

- leaking or burst water pipes;
- not enough ventilation (air flow) to outside, where water is used (for example, in bathrooms, laundry areas, and kitchens);
- condensation (water droplets) on cold surfaces.

Outdoor sources include:

- water intrusion, when water comes in through leaky roofs or windows, or in flooding;
- outdoor surfaces that slope and drain water toward a building; and
- sprinklers and downspouts that aim water at a building.

## Fixing Dampness and Mold Problems

The California Housing Code (HSC §17920.3) requires that property owners provide a rental unit that is fit for occupation and healthy for the people living in it. Renters should look for obvious conditions that show moisture or mold, and also less obvious signs like visibly painted-over mold, water leaks inside cabinets, or odor in a sealed-up dwelling. Also look for conditions likely to cause future problems, like a bathroom that has no working vent fan or no window that opens, or a clothes dryer without an outside vent.

The California Housing Code says that when dampness or visible mold (or certain other conditions) in a dwelling is a hazard to the health of occupants, the dwelling is *substandard* and the property owner must fix the conditions. Note, if a moldy area on a wall or ceiling is simply painted over, without fixing the source of the moisture and removing moldy wallboard, the mold is likely to grow again.

CDPH recommends fixing these problems as follows:

- identifying and correcting the source of any water that may allow mold to grow;
- rapid drying or removal of damp materials; and
- cleaning or removing mold and moldy materials as rapidly and safely as possible

## Renters in California

If you rent your home and you suspect there is mold or moisture, it is important to tell the property owner or manager. Early detection and correction of the dampness and mold problems can decrease the risks to your health and prevent the problem from getting worse. If your property owner will not respond to your concerns in a reasonable amount of time, you can

contact your local (city or county) code enforcement agency and ask for a code enforcement officer to inspect for a violation of the housing code. If they determine there is a violation, the local inspector can require the property owner to correct the violation.

Although many moisture and mold problems in rental dwellings are the responsibility of the property owner and must be addressed by them, a code enforcement officer may determine that moisture in a building results from a tenant's actions or inactions.

A list of Code Enforcement agencies, with a focus on dampness and mold, for California cities and counties, is published online by CDPH. This resource may provide information on whom to contact to obtain an inspection for enforcement of the housing code, depending on where you live. This resource and additional information from CDPH on dampness and mold is available online at the Indoor Air Quality Section website ([www.cdph.ca.gov/iaq/mold](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/iaq/mold)). To see a video series on mold in the home, visit [www.cdph.ca.gov/mold](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/mold).

*Property owners must provide a rental unit that is fit for occupation and healthy for the people living in it, and tenants must notify property owners of any dampness and mold problems.*