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## What to Do About a Moldy Rental Apartment

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This document discusses the steps that a tenant in a rental apartment or rental home can take to look for and test for mold, how to inform building management of a mold problem, what to expect the rental property managers to do if they are going to address a mold problem properly, and what the rental apartment tenant needs to watch out for during a mold investigation and mold remediation of their home. An easy-to-print PDF version of this article is [here](#). © Copyright 2008 Daniel Friedman, All Rights Reserved. Information Accuracy & Bias Pledge is at below-left. Use the links at page left to navigate this document or to go to Other Website Topics. **Green links** at left show where you are in our document & website.

## Mold Advice for Rental Tenants - What to Do About a Moldy Rental Apartment

**What can a tenant do when s/he discovers that s/he is living in an intolerably moldy apartment?**

A rental tenant in a moldy apartment in Kentucky asked us for advice. The risk in her situation was increased because she suffers from a compromised immune system. Our advice to her follows her letter.

### Tenant describes a moldy apartment



*I appreciate the user friendly format and the wealth of information on your [website](#). I'm suffering severely from mold related illness and I need immediate help.*

*Two months ago I moved into a new apartment. Ever since I have had terrible congestion that appears w/in a minute of entering the apt. And only clears up after hours of leaving the apt. I have gone and had allergy testing and find I am highly allergic to \*most\* molds.*

*I have found a black shadowing mold like substance on the walls coming from beneath the kitchen cabinets. The \*dust\* settles on the edge of the counter at the wall beneath the cabinets. The dust is large particles that look a lot like black pepper. It also sticks to wall on the way down.*

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## Possible causes of apartment mold, possible extent of mold

*I have been made aware of a leaking roof in the 2nd floor apartments so severe that requires buckets to contain. The water, I have been told runs down the walls into the ground floor apartments where I am a tenant in one. The apartments are known to be old and from the road I can see large blackish streaks across the light brown roofing.*

## What steps the tenant has already taken

*I've just bought two HEPA filters for the bedroom and living room which has seemed to make a significant difference in the severity of the congestion. Also, I have been told that the air conditioning and heat is run on a water coil system (the air is circulated through all of the apartments) which happens to be in my bedroom closet. when I removed the vent to put a filter in I found mold covering the back of the metal slats in vent cover. I cleaned it with bleach.*

## Tenant Wants to Move out of Moldy Apartment - Lease Breaking Issues

*I need to move because I cannot live with this building-related sickness. It is important to know what I'm dealing with before I go to management, because it seems to be such a severe structural issue, they may try to do something underhanded and cover it up.*

*I have a year lease and need to handle the situation in a way that will allow me get out from under this situation w/out my being taken advantage of and I am no expert in these matters.*

## Compromised autoimmune system increases health risks for tenant in moldy apartment

*Also I have some sort of autoimmune condition(Lupus, MS they haven't pinned it down) I am no longer able to do what I went to school for. My fine motor skills are compromised (and I have slight tremor).*

## Action Advice for Tenants in Moldy Apartments

**On-site inspection is important:** Keep in mind that anyone whose opinion you seek by telephone, email, or web "prospecting", even if s/he is very competent, is distant and can't see all of the site conditions. Therefore such advice can only be general, and we must keep in mind that there could be, in fact probably *are*, important observations that might change the assessment of an individual situation as well as the advice on steps to take.

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## When health complaints appear building related

**Building-related illness symptoms often stop** or diminish quickly when the suffering person leaves that location. A simple subjective test which you have applied is the observation that you suffer health complaints soon on entry to the building and they stop when you've been out of the building.

**Contents may be contaminated from a prior residence:** Of course if someone's apartment contents were mold-contaminated from a previous residence those complaints could still occur, so it's important to rule out that chance by recalling what reactions you had to your previous home.

**Mold related illness symptoms don't always stop right away:** Finally, while some building-related or building-aggravated health complaints diminish or stop entirely on leaving that environment, other complaints may be slow to appear and also slow to diminish even after leaving the problem environment. In fact high exposure to some materials such as allergens or mold can increase sensitivity to those particles in some individuals, making them later react to even low levels of such particles in a new environment.

## Immediate Safety Advice for Tenants Complaining of Moldy Apartments

1. **Check for carbon monoxide - a potentially fatal problem:** First, some complaints I've heard, such as headache and nausea, have been traced to very dangerous exposure to carbon monoxide. So particularly if a building has gas-fired appliances or heat, it is important to rule out other non-mold but very dangerous conditions. Be sure that there is a working smoke detector and working carbon monoxide detector installed in appropriate locations such as in and outside of bedrooms.
2. **Warning to high-risk building occupants:** Second, people with severe asthma, compromised immune systems, elderly, infant, or otherwise at extra high risk of mold or other illnesses should be quicker to exit questionable areas and to avoid unnecessary exposure to respiratory or other irritants such as mold or moldy dust or demolition dust and debris.
3. **Do not permit incompetent demolition work:** Third, before you and the building management have a clear idea of what work is needed and what health risks, if any, are involved, do not permit a work crew to come into the apartment and simply start demolition. The risk is that mold-contaminated materials are indeed present and that without proper containment, the workers can make problems worse, exposing both apartment occupants and their belongings to moldy dust and debris.
4. **Check with your doctor:** to see if s/he has specific warnings or advice about your complaint, medical condition, and environment.

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## Health Risks for Tenants in Rental Apartments - Compromised immune system increases vulnerability to mold-related illness

The fact that a building occupant's immune system is compromised places that person at extra risk and means that s/he and the contents of their apartment need to be protected carefully.

People at extra risk of health problems if exposed to moldy dust and demolition debris include elderly, infants, immune-compromised, asthmatics, people suffering from COPD or other respiratory illness, and possibly others. While chronic exposure to high levels of toxic or allergenic mold can make even some healthy people become sensitized as well, the people I just listed should be particularly careful about exposure.

## Possible hidden mold in Rental Apartments



**The mold that you \*see\*** may not by any means be the whole problem, or even much of the problem; various species could be in building cavities and in the HVAC system. Too often we find that "black mold" on building surfaces has received attention but hard-to-see *Penicillium* sp. or *Aspergillus* sp. (for example) remain in large reservoirs on building surfaces or in insulation.

**Magic bullets:** Also, "bleaching mold" or "fogging" or "encapsulating" mold is never a successful remedy for a moldy building. The places where mold is growing must be found, moldy material removed, exposed surfaces cleaned, and the causes of mold growth corrected. If the area of mold growth is large (more than 30 sq ft) the work needs to proceed with special procedures to avoid spreading moldy dusty debris around.

## Tenant-identified possible mold reservoirs

The tenant or building maintenance staff may have already identified apparent mold reservoirs or sources, and of course there could be other sources from other leaks or problems they haven't discovered:

**Roof leaks** - can have leaked into ceilings and walls; depending on what building materials used, they could be moldy with problem molds.

**HVAC systems** - If there is a common A/C duct system which has become mold contaminated, no amount of cleaning in your immediate apartment would be sufficient since it is possible that the whole system needs to be cleaned, or possibly some duct sections replaced, and the cause corrected. Also it is common for A/C condensate or water from a chiller system to leak; water could have leaked into your closet ceiling and walls, also creating a problem mold reservoir.

**Building insulation** - often building insulation has become mold contaminated but looks "clean" to the naked eye. Few mold inspectors test this material, yet it is often discovered to be the principal problem mold reservoir in some building areas.

Very often when I visit a site I find other leaks and mold sources that need to be addressed, so I wouldn't assume these are the full extent of what needs attention.

## Building management reluctance to address mold problems properly

**Mold cleanup cost concerns:** Sometimes a building management is reluctant to face the expense and trouble of handling leaks and mold contamination correctly. Correct response might require a (costly) thorough building survey, evaluation, diagnosis of problem areas and their causes and specification of the steps to remedy them, followed by performing of the work followed by clearance inspection and testing by someone not at all connected with the contractors performing the remediation. It would be rare for a building manager to have such an expert on full-time staff, so hiring an outside expert would be necessary.

**Mold fear concerns:** Reluctance of building managers to address mold also comes from the wish to avoid alarming other tenants. In my experience this is always a mistaken notion, as tenants talk to one another anyway, and building-related illness frightens people - fear spreading faster than mold growth. Accurate information and the assurance that tenant concerns are being handled competently is more effective than other less direct responses by building management.

**True cost of improper mold remediation:** Half-baked or amateur workmanship risks increasing the ultimate cost to the building management:

- **Improper mold cleanup can increase indoor mold levels**, making building occupants sick and/or by contaminating their belongings leading to the need for additional cleaning of contents and personal items.
- **Improper mold remediation can lead to unnecessarily high costs** of repeated attempts to

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clean up or remove problem mold or even repeated visits by building inspectors and "mold testers" until someone finally correctly diagnoses the causes of problem mold and finds the actual mold reservoirs, including moldy materials that may not have been obvious based on just a superficial inspection, an air test, swab, or culture mold sample.

- **Risks of mold-related illness may spread** to other building occupants or to future tenants in the same rental space if the cleanup is not properly performed.
- **Improper mold causation diagnosis risks having to repeat** the mold cleanup because the basic causes of mold growth have not been identified and corrected

In sum, it's least costly if mold remediation is performed properly in the first place.

## What a tenant can do about a moldy apartment

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1. **Notify in writing:** You should notify building management in writing of unhealthy unsafe conditions that need attention and that you are unable to live in the apartment. If you are not certain of the presence of unsafe conditions in the rental apartment, your letter should state your observations, complaints, concerns, and ask the building management to bring in the appropriate professional to inspect, diagnose, and if needed, specify what repairs, cleaning, or remediation are needed. Most building maintenance employees lack the training to recognize mold, conduct appropriate mold inspection and testing, diagnose the extent and causes of problem mold, and evaluate the risk of mold to rental tenants, nor specify the mold remediation procedures necessary.

2. **Simple mold testing:** You might be successful in identifying some of the mold suspect material you see as problematic, and you might collect a settled dust sample to see you can pick up indications of other problem molds or allergens. However identifying mold in an apartment, while it may convince building management to act, does not and cannot establish the level of exposure that an individual has had to the mold found, nor does it assure that the mold identified is the only or even the main hazard. *The prime use of tenant sampling in this case is to show management that there is at least some evidence of problem mold in the building*

[Our mold sampling instruction](#) contains sampling instructions you can follow. I'm on assignment out of the U.S. and won't be processing any lab samples until after 9/10 so if you are in a rush you should use another lab but you can still follow my sampling procedures.

3. **If building management responds:** If building management elects to make some effort to deal with the problem:

3.a. **Proper dust control:** be sure that the work does not create demolition debris and mess which contaminates or further contaminates your belongings, especially soft goods like curtains, carpets,

bedcovers, which may then require cleaning, and worse, upholstered furniture which might not be able to be cleaned adequately.

3.b. **Possible contents cleaning:** if your possessions are already likely to be contaminated with moldy dust they should be cleaned before taking them to a new home; soft goods can be laundered or dry cleaned; hard surfaces can simply be washed or wiped. Moldy upholstered furniture is in question depending on how bad it is; surface dust can be vacuumed off of it; if upholstered furniture has been wet or has had mold growing on or in it is probably not salvageable without complete reupholstering from the frame up.

### Call the health department about a moldy rental apartment?



In some egregious cases tenants have taken their complaint to the local health department.

If there is a serious and obvious problem with mold or other health concerns in a rental apartment the health department may condemn the property and require the owners to act. In my opinion this rather drastic step may be appropriate in dire circumstances. It will also be likely to end any cooperation between landlord and tenant.

The more you know about proper procedures to find and clean up moldy buildings the better you can assure that your situation is handled properly. The articles at these links might be helpful:

[The Mold Action Guide](#)

[When to Hire a Mold Professional](#)

[FAQs about Mold](#)

Keep me posted on how you proceed. Best wishes.

Daniel

When is mold a problem in buildings? What should be done about it? Find expert field and lab testing, inspection, remediation advice, but ... avoid "fear of mold" and bogus advice which can both cost you and yet may not really address the problem effectively. My interest is in providing expert service to my clients, protecting not only their health but their wallets. I provide field investigations to find problems and to recommend solutions to mold in buildings, and I operate a forensic laboratory in New York which accepts mold and other indoor air and particle samples for examination. In depth information is at [www.inspect-ny.com](http://www.inspect-ny.com) and the links at that page. Website content suggestions are most welcome.

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Case Histories: At my Mold Weblog [Mold Central: indoor air quality investigation case histories](#), I post summaries of field and lab toxic or allergenic mold and other indoor air quality investigations. I omit private information. I describe observations, procedures, and findings helpful to readers who are trying to remedy their own mold, allergenic, carbon monoxide, odor, or other indoor air and related health concerns in their indoor environment.

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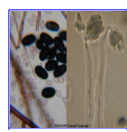
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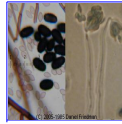
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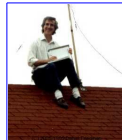


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