The Asthma & Allergy Center

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Is it Mold or a Cold?

That stuffy nose, sneezing, and congestion. The itchy eyes and nose. The wheezing and coughing of asthma. Is it a simple cold or allergy to mold?

Mold allergy is one of the major causes of allergic rhinitis and allergic asthma. Unlike the common cold that lasts a few days, allergy symptoms tend to linger. Mold allergy can be identified by a complete patient history and some basic skin testing. Management of mold allergy includes prevention, medications, and in some cases, immunotherapy.

Symptoms of mold allergy are generally similar to those found with pollen, dust, or animal dander. Reactions to molds can also cause other forms of chronic lung disease.

Mold is a subgroup of minute plants called fungi. There are an estimated 100,0000 varieties ranging in size from a single cell to large shelf mushrooms founds growing on forest trees. Airborne fungi, especially those found in plants and soil, are actually more common than pollen. Fungi grow best in temperate, tropical and sub-arctic regions and prefer dark, moist places.

Fungi have many important uses, including food (mushrooms and truffles), drugs (penicillin, cortisone and certain vitamins), and a variety of industrial organic acids. Fungi are also important in the fermentation processes of beer, wine and bread making and can be found in some cheeses.

Unlike green plants, fungi feed off of other organic matter, hastening the process of decay – nature's own system for recycling. However, fungi are not always considered helpful.

Fungi become harmful, even toxic, when growth occurs in foods during storage or transportation. They destroy materials such as leather, clothing, and other consumer goods. They cause crop failure in plants and diseases in humans and animals. They can even be poisonous if ingested (i.e., poisonous mushrooms).

While fungi may be an important triggering factor for symptoms of allergic rhinitis and asthma, it must be emphasized that fungi will be found in virtually all human environments except for sterilized rooms in some hospitals and laboratories. Humans can never rid themselves completely of fungi exposure; however, growth can be controlled and exposure can be reduced once the offending culprit has been identified.

PLACES FUNGI CAN BE FOUND INDOORS

•Around the edges of bathtubs, sinks and commodes
•Basement walls
•Items stored in wet basement or similar areas
•Wall-to-wall carpet and/or carpet padding
•House dust (the most common source of indoor fungal spores)
•Stuffed toys, furniture, mattresses, box springs, seasonal clothing
•Vacation homes
•Humidifiers attached to central heating systems
•Poorly maintained table-top humidifiers
•Refrigerators (both inside and underneath)
•“Crawl spaces” under the house
•Any area of the home where uncontrolled humidity (greater than 50%) is a problem

People who like to work in the yard may find more difficulty with symptoms when raking or mowing, but this is not always due to fungi. Algae, insect body parts, and pollens are stirred up along with molds, creating an allergic stew for sensitive people. People who explore caves are exposed to fungi in the soil or in bat droppings, which can cause infection as well. Certain occupations, such as agricultural work, also increase exposure to fungi.

TO REDUCE EXPOSURE TO OR LIMIT THE GROWTH OF FUNGI THAT CAUSE ALLERGIC RHINITIS OR ASTHMA

•locate the source of the fungi and correct the problem that permits growth
•avoid outdoor activities during wet, foggy weather as this holds concentrated levels of fungi in the air
•be aware that breezy, sunny weather may also increase the circulation of fungi in the air, so it is best to keep windows closed on such days
•avoid hobbies or occupations that include agricultural tasks or exposure to fungi unless symptoms can be controlled by taking medication before and after exposure; a mask should be worn over the nose and mouth during the activity
•vacuum and dust frequently, wearing a mask
•keep the house reasonably dry, especially the kitchen, bathroom, and basement areas
•use exhaust fans in the bathroom if there are no windows
•use a dehumidifier in the basement
•correct structural problems that permit areas of the house to get wet
•keep only those items that are necessary in storage areas of the home
•do not let items pile up around the house, especially clothing, newspapers, shoes, etc.
•keep garbage containers clean
•encase mattresses and pillows with plastic covers (dust-mite proof encasings work best)
•avoid stuffed animals for children
•treat air duct systems annually with a stream of carbon dioxide to eliminate fungal growth

- consider installation of electronic air filter within the central air system; a portable HEPA unit may help to reduce dust and fungal particles
- do not permit rain or water to pool around the outside areas of the house
- avoid use of cool-air vaporizers
- keep indoor humidity around 40%

When cleaning moldy areas of the home, spray the area with an anti-fungal reagent such as chlorine bleach and leave it on for several hours before washing and drying. Follow cleaning with a spray-on preventative.

Read package directions carefully when using these products. The cleaner and bleach will take the color out of cloth or wallpaper, and some of the sprays used to prevent the return of fungi are extremely irritating to the eyes and lungs. Also, when decorating, use paints and wallpapers that have been treated with mold-inhibiting agents to prevent problems.

House plants that do not require high humidity do not create higher levels of fungi; therefore, it is not necessary to rid the home of plants. However, those plants requiring frequent watering encourage mold growth in the bottom of the pot and should be avoided.

Although a person may have symptoms after drinking beer or wine, it does not mean he or she is allergic to fungi. Symptoms may be due to a non allergic response to chemicals in the wine.