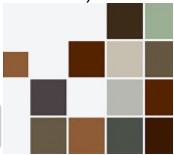


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#234 – HOA Homefront – The Truth About Toxic Mold [Part 1]

by Kelly G. Richardson, Esq.

In 2000, a new “toxic mold” panic swept the country, and sixteen years, untold lawsuits, and billions of dollars later, major myths still plague and unnecessarily panic association boards, managers and homeowners. The myths all too often cause exaggerated repairs, unduly frightened residents, and conflict. In this and the next column, I will address thirteen pervasive *myths*.

- **Mold is new.** Mold, one of the earliest and simplest life forms, has existed for thousands of years. Almost a hundred years ago, mold was the basis of the discovery of penicillin. Mold is ever-present, as is dust or pollen.
- **The scientific and medical communities confirm mold's many dangers.** In 2004, the National Institute of Medicine published its comprehensive study on indoor mold exposure, called “Damp Indoor Spaces and Health.” A central finding was: “Scientific evidence links mold ... in homes and buildings to asthma symptoms in some people with the chronic disorder, as well as to coughing, wheezing, and upper respiratory tract symptoms in otherwise healthy people... However, the available evidence does not support an association between ... mold and the wide range of other health complaints that have been ascribed.” That sounds like mold is dangerous the same as is dust or pollen – to people with severe asthma. The announcement containing this finding is easily located by a web search, but it did not receive much press play – stories of frightened people living in tents are more interesting.
- **One must determine the kind of mold present.** Mold consultants and plaintiff attorneys often describe some molds as worse than others. The most famous mold is *stachybotrys chartarum*, a mold producing infinitesimal quantities of a substance similar to botulism poison. However, the amount is so small they call it ‘mycotoxin’. It sounds frightening, but the scientific community long ago debunked the myth that this or any mold was somehow poisonous to breathe. For example, read the National Institute of Health Fact Sheet on Mold, found at www.niehs.nih.gov (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov>).
- **California is protected by the Toxic Mold Protection Act of 2001.** The “Toxic Mold Protection Act of 2001,” found at Health and Safety Code 26100, instructed the Department of Public Health to develop Permissible Exposure Limits of the various mold strains. However, in 2005, and again in 2008, the DPH reported that the task could not be completed with the scientific information available. Consequently, there is presently no official standard as to how many mold spores of any given variety are “unhealthy”.
- **Always start with a mold test.** The Environmental Protection Agency recommends *against* mold testing. There is no standard as to how many mold spores are “unhealthy,” and indoor air sampling tests are extremely vulnerable to events in the home changing the results. A recent shower, window opening or carpet cleaning are some of the many factors which can completely change test outcomes.

Mold tests, bluntly, primarily frighten the occupants and create a “need” for the expense of a mold consultant a second test after the area is cleaned. Since the health authorities have not confirmed any particular strain is more dangerous, and since there is no official standard as to how many airborne spores are unhealthy, there is rarely a good reason to spend the money on such a test.

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[Part 2 follows, with seven more mold myths, next]

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