

Mold, a Growing Problem

by *Phoebe Chongchua*

Mold is often a silent but costly roommate. Sometimes homeowners aren't even aware that there's an issue until the problem has progressed to a more serious level. That means if you're a prospective homebuyer you should be doing your own investigating and perhaps hiring a certified mold inspector to review the property as well.

"If someone has a water intrusion which could come from many different sources, has had an indoor humidity problem ... or possibly a building defect ... and they don't deal with it within the first 24 to 48 hours to get it dried out effectively, then a problem can initiate," says William Salesky, Co-CEO Sherlock Healthy Homes, Inc.

Salesky's California-based company handles mold issues in residential and commercial real estate. He says a big part of the reason that mold develops is because of a lack of education on the subject. He uses teenagers to illustrate his point.

"You have teenagers who don't turn on the bathroom fan. Where does the water go when they take a shower?" Salesky says rhetorically.

The moisture from the shower gets absorbed into the dry wall and eventually with repeated exposure a fungal growth can develop in the bathroom. Salesky says his company sees the damage from this particular scenario over and over again.

But as common as this situation is, Salesky says another mold problem starts outside the home and can soon make its way inside.

"Probably one of the top causes of mold in residential property today is sprinklers facing the house."

Salesky says the way the landscape for many homes and buildings is designed causes the stucco to constantly take a beating. Often flowerbeds are placed right alongside the building and sprinkler systems are positioned so that they don't water the concrete walkway; instead they face in the direction of the home and that's where the trouble begins.

"Stucco is porous. Stucco doesn't seal and that's what we have in most of our homes from the 1960's on. What it relies on is tar paper or roofing felts; after 20, 30, 40 years, guess what? That stuff breaks down. If there's been a renovation and someone hasn't paid attention now we have a gap in it and what do you think happens? The water migrates past the roofing felts and hits the drywall on the inside of the walls," warns Salesky.

If you're wondering where to look to see if a home needs some mold clean-up, Salesky says there are some telltale signs. Take a good whiff in a room -- is the aroma stuffy and musty?

Sometimes you can't immediately identify where the moisture is coming from. Observe the air, does it smell damp? Is the smell confined to a single location such as a closet? If so, it's likely the clothes will reek of the same odor.

In the bathroom, check to see if the toilet rocks; an unstable toilet can lead to a severe mold problem.

Next, head to the kitchen and do a thorough check which includes moving the refrigerator, stove, dishwasher, and other appliances to see if you can spot moisture or a water leak -- these areas are often overlooked and mold can quickly develop.

Obvious signs of past water damage do not necessarily mean there is a mold problem. However, it's a good idea to investigate a little further. Look to see if windows or doors appear to have leaks.

Have a good look at areas such as wood trim, wallboard, and exterior siding. When these surfaces become wet repeatedly, the paint and coating eventually chip.

How about the floors -- is the wood or tile flooring buckling? Moisture levels above 13 percent can cause wood floors to swell and excessive swelling can lead to buckling of the floor.

Whether you're shopping for that mold-free home or you're trying to make sure your residence remains mold-free, the best way to keep mold out is to act quickly at the first sign of it.

"It's all about speed of response and attention to where the moisture is coming from because obviously you have to get to the source of the moisture. Without moisture you're not going to have mold," says Salesky.

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