

Mold Allergy

By Mayo Clinic staff

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If you have a mold allergy, your immune system overreacts when you breathe in mold spores. This reaction triggers a cascade of reactions that lead to allergy symptoms. Like other allergies, a mold allergy can make you cough, make your eyes itch and cause other symptoms that make you miserable. In some people, mold allergy is linked to asthma and exposure causes restricted breathing and other airway symptoms.

If you have a mold allergy, the best defense is to reduce your exposure to the types of mold that cause your reaction. While it isn't always possible to avoid mold allergy triggers, medications can help keep mold allergy reactions under control.

Symptoms

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Mold allergy causes the same signs and symptoms that occur in other types of upper respiratory allergies. Mold allergy symptoms can include:

- Sneezing
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Cough and postnasal drip
- Itchy eyes, nose and throat
- Watery eyes

Mold allergy symptoms vary from person to person, and range from mild to severe. You may have year-round symptoms or symptoms that flare up only during certain times of the year. You may notice symptoms when the weather is damp, or you're in indoor or outdoor spaces that have high concentrations of mold.

If you have a mold allergy and asthma, your asthma symptoms may be triggered by exposure to mold spores. In some people, exposure to certain molds can cause a severe asthma attack. Signs and symptoms of asthma include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath

- Chest tightness

When to see a doctor

If you have a stuffy nose, sneezing, watery eyes or other bothersome symptoms that don't seem to go away, see your doctor.

Causes

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Like any allergy, mold allergy symptoms are triggered by an overly sensitive immune system response. When you inhale tiny, airborne mold spores, your body recognizes them as foreign invaders and develops allergy-causing antibodies to fight them.

After the exposure has passed, you still produce antibodies that "remember" this invader, so that any later contact with the mold causes your immune system to react. This reaction triggers the release of substances such as histamine, which cause itchy, watery eyes, runny nose, sneezing and other mold allergy symptoms.

Molds are very common both inside and outside. There are many different types, but only certain kinds of mold cause allergies. Being allergic to one type of mold doesn't necessarily mean you'll be allergic to another. Some of the most common molds that cause allergies include alternaria, aspergillus, cladosporium and penicillium.

When it's not an allergy

Although a mold allergy is the most common problem caused by exposure to mold, mold can cause illness without causing an allergic reaction. Mold can also cause infections, or irritant and toxic reactions. Infections caused by mold can cause a variety of problems from flu-like symptoms, to skin infections and even pneumonia.

An irritant reaction is caused when substances from molds called volatile organic compounds irritate the mucous membranes in the body. Symptoms of an irritant reaction are similar to an allergy and include eye irritation, runny nose, cough, voice hoarseness, headache and skin irritation. With a mold allergy, your symptoms will generally get progressively worse with each exposure to mold, while an irritant reaction doesn't get worse.

A toxic reaction to mold is caused by eating, drinking or inhaling substances called mycotoxins. As with an irritant reaction, the symptoms of a toxic reaction may also include flu-like symptoms, eye and skin irritation, and breathing troubles. You may also experience headaches, nervousness, dizziness, difficulty concentrating and extreme fatigue if you're having a toxic reaction to mold.

Risk factors

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A number of factors can make you more likely to develop a mold allergy, or worsen your existing mold allergy symptoms, including:

- **Having a family history of allergies.** If allergies and asthma run in your family, you're more likely to develop a mold allergy.
- **Working in an occupation that exposes you to mold.** Occupations where mold exposure may be high include farming, dairy work, logging, baking, millwork, carpentry, greenhouse work, winemaking and furniture repair.
- **Living in a house with high humidity.** If your indoor humidity is higher than 60 percent, you may have increased exposure to mold in your home. Mold can grow virtually anywhere if the conditions are right — in basements, behind walls in framing, on soap-coated grout and other damp surfaces, in carpet pads and in the carpet itself. Exposure to high levels of household mold may trigger mold allergy symptoms.
- **Work or live in a building that's been exposed to excess moisture.** Leaky pipes, water seepage during rainstorms, flood damage: At some point, nearly every building has some kind of excessive moisture. This moisture can allow mold to flourish.
- **Living in a house with poor ventilation.** Tight window and door seals may trap moisture indoors and prevent proper ventilation, creating ideal conditions for mold growth. Damp areas, such as bathrooms, kitchens and basements, are most vulnerable.

Complications

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Most allergic responses to mold involve hay fever-type symptoms that can make you miserable, but aren't serious. However, certain allergic conditions caused by mold are more severe. These include:

- **Mold-induced asthma.** In people allergic to mold, breathing in spores can trigger an asthma flare-up. If you have a mold allergy and asthma, be sure you have an emergency plan in place in case of a severe asthma attack.
- **Allergic fungal sinusitis.** This occurs when fungus lodges and grows in the sinuses. Surgery may be necessary to remove a tightly packed infection ("fungal ball").
- **Allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis.** This fungal infection of the lungs can occur in people with asthma or cystic fibrosis.
- **Hypersensitivity pneumonitis.** This rare condition occurs when exposure to airborne particles such as mold spores cause the lungs to become inflamed. It may be triggered by exposure to allergy-causing dust at work.

Other problems caused by mold

Some believe that certain molds (such as so-called "black mold") can cause a host of signs and symptoms such as fatigue, headache, nausea, fever, rashes and coughing — and even a condition that causes bleeding lungs in infants (acute idiopathic pulmonary hemorrhage). While some molds contain toxins that are poisonous when eaten, more research is needed to determine whether molds inside buildings release airborne toxins that cause problems in otherwise healthy people.

Living or working in a damp building can cause respiratory symptoms including nasal congestion, sneezing, runny nose, throat irritation and cough. But, it's not clear that mold is always the culprit behind these symptoms. Damp buildings are prime environments for other health hazards, including harmful bacteria, dust mites and rodents.

Exposure to high levels of mold can cause nonallergic complications in people who have weakened immune systems. If you're healthy, you can handle mold exposure, but if you're on chemotherapy or immune-suppressing drugs, you may be at risk of developing a mold infection.

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