

# Gailen Marshall: Texans' worries about mold are way out of hand

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By **GAILEN MARSHALL**

What do these things have in common: wine, penicillin, cheese, beer and mushrooms? Can't guess? Here is a big hint: It also is the latest dubious health scare costing Texas consumers millions of dollars in higher insurance premiums and needless home "health" testing, and it is being used as a get-rich-quick scheme for some personal injury lawyers. Ah, now you know – it is called *mold*.

So how did this very common type of fungus, present in all sorts of good things we use on a daily basis and ever present in our environment, grow into a major consumer crisis? The answer may surprise you.

As a board-certified allergist-immunologist, I have taught, done research and seen patients with a variety of immune-based medical conditions for 14 years. In the past several years, my clinical office has become increasingly populated by very frightened, sometimes angry individuals. They believe, or have been told, they have "toxic mold disease." But do they really?

First, let's examine some facts about mold. There are many different kinds of mold – at least 10,000 common types. Mold is everywhere, because it simply requires a source of water, sugar and oxygen along with a friendly surface to thrive and grow. In places where a lot of water is in the air itself (like Texas), mold easily finds comfortable growth sites and is especially prosperous.

Is mold harmful to people? Can molds cause memory loss, fatigue or brain damage? For most people, the answer is a resounding, and hopefully reassuring, "no!" The world is filled with mold – we breathe it, we eat it, and we drink it every day with no ill effects. Some people do develop allergies and experience symptoms of asthma or hay fever when exposed to some mold spores. There also are a few mold-related diseases that can be serious, but those are rare. So what about the "experts" who claim to diagnose all sorts of mold-related illnesses such as memory loss or learning disabilities? There is no proof to support those claims.

Still, even though health risks may be vastly exaggerated, most people would rather not have excess, visible mold in their homes. If there is a lot of mold, it looks bad, and it has an unpleasant odor. But removing mold is relatively simple. If you have mold, you have excess moisture, and that needs to be eliminated, whether it is a roof leak, a shower leak or condensation. Often, the mold simply can be cleaned off and won't return if the moisture is removed.

Should you pay for a "mold test"? No. The nation's most reputable experts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the reigning mold expert from Harvard's School of Public Health, don't support most home mold testing. If you see or smell mold in your home, clean it up and stop the source of water. It is that simple.

Should you panic? To me, this is the most important issue of all. You need to react to mold based on the facts, not on the hysteria and hype you may have heard or read. The mold scare already is having a troubling effect on the Texas economy and on individual lives. Texas insurance rates already are more than double the national average and are continuing to rise based in large part on mold-related claims. Moreover, families are being moved out of their homes by testers and remediators and having their lives disrupted – most for no legitimate reason whatsoever.

The bottom line is this: If you are ill, see a physician. If he thinks you may have mold allergies, ask to be tested by a reputable specialist who has the credentials to provide calm, reliable medical information – then follow your doctor's direction for treatment. Don't be afraid to discuss with him why he thinks mold is causing your problems.

If you see or smell mold in your home, simply clean it up and plug the water leak. If you need an expert to help, find a reputable person or company trained in moisture management to find and fix the water source. And perhaps most important, if someone comes to you to try to assess blame for the mold "exposure," ask yourself whether you want the aggravation, expense and frustration associated with trying to get compensated for the everyday risks associated with living on our planet.

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