

Q: Does mould cause asthma?

A: Yes, mould can cause asthma in people genetically predisposed to allergies.

Our expert: Professor Connie Katelaris

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What do you do with mould in your home?

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Living with mould is never a pleasant experience, whether it's clinging stubbornly to kitchen tiles or creeping along bathroom walls.

We may think a little bit of mould around the house is harmless, but can it actually cause significant health problems such as asthma?

Obviously mould can exacerbate asthma, or other allergy symptoms, in people with a known mould allergy. But new research suggests mould might even cause asthma in people who are genetically predisposed to the respiratory illness, says Professor Connie Katelaris, professor of Immunology and Allergy at the University of Western Sydney.

The study found children who were predisposed to allergies, because one or more parent had allergies, were at greater risk of developing asthma if certain types of mould were found in their home.

"It showed very clearly, with this study at least, that certain indoor moulds can be linked to actually causing asthma in the first place in people who genetically predisposed," Katelaris says.

The researchers looked at 36 different types of mould collected in household dust samples and found three types of mould, usually occurring in water-damaged homes, linked to later development of asthma.

Other common household allergens, including dust mite, cat, dog and cockroach allergen, were tested, but mould was also the only one found to be a risk factor for developing the illness.

How mould affects us

Mould is a fungi, along with mushrooms and yeast, and is everywhere around us; in the air we breathe and in the dust around our homes.

When mould reproduces it creates spores that are carried in the air. As an allergen, inhaling mould spores affects the body in the same way as inhaling dust mites or grass pollen, says Katelaris.

"You breathe it in and in genetically predisposed people they make an allergic response to it. It stimulates the development of a specific antibody that can then on subsequent exposure cause allergic reactions, and those reactions may become obvious as hayfever type symptoms or in some cases as asthma," she says.

Mould can also be a health hazard if you have a weakened immune system, for example if you are receiving certain medical treatments or have a condition known to weaken the immune system such as cystic fibrosis or other chronic lung diseases. While it's not common, sometimes people with compromised immune systems can develop an infection after inhaling some moulds.

It is possible mould may contain toxins – or produce substances – that harm us in other ways, Katelaris says, but this is a very poorly understood area.

Invisible mould

Unfortunately, you can't always see the mould that causes allergic reactions and it may come from water leaks caused by poor building construction, says Katelaris.

"In some of these houses [in the study] where they had the biggest levels of moulds you couldn't actually see the mould if you went and did an inspection," she says.

"The most important message to get out is band-aid treatments don't work, and this sort of mould problem is a problem with poor housing construction and water in the house," Katelaris says.

"It has to be at the building level that the remediation happens, not just buying an anti-mould [product] and wiping it off the wall," she says.

Cleaning and preventing mould

The best way to handle mould is to prevent it occurring in the first place, so you need to identify and remove sources of moisture around your home. Also sort out any holes in your roof, leaky plumbing, windows or other faults that are causing dampness as soon as possible.

Inside your home you need to make sure damp and enclosed areas, which allow mould to flourish, are kept well ventilated.

Bathrooms, laundries and kitchens – and the appliances we use in these rooms such as clothes dryers, washing machines and dishwashers – can all cause moisture and provide the perfect breeding ground for mould.

So keep these areas as dry and well ventilated as possible, mop up excess water straight away, open doors and windows, or install exhaust fans. As for the many anti-mould cleaners on the supermarket shelves, according to [Choice](#) most of these aren't as effective as the marketers may claim.

The most common active ingredient in mould cleaners is **bleach**, which loses potency the longer it sits on the shelf. Bleach can also damage the surface that it's cleaning, which can lead to more mould growth down the track.

Also supermarket mould treatments often just bleach the mould white without actually killing it.

If you need to clean up small areas of mould, [Victoria's Department of Health](#) suggests you use a damp cloth and detergent, vinegar or alcohol solution. But if you have a bigger problem with mould then you might need to get a professional – such as an occupational hygienist or environmental health and safety professional – to help remove it.

Other tips to prevent and control mould in your home include:

- Wash mould off hard surfaces and dry completely: you should use a system of washing and rinsing with several separate buckets and clothes to help avoid recontamination.
- Consider replacing absorbent or porous materials, such as carpets, soft furnishing or fabrics that are mouldy.
- Use exhaust fans or open windows when cooking, showering or using the dishwasher.
- If possible, vent clothes dryers to the outside.

Professor Connie Katelaris is a Professor of Immunology and Allergy at the University of Western Sydney and Head of Unit at South Western Sydney Local Health District, she spoke to Jenny Pogson.

****Additional Solutions to consider for preventing mould and condensation build up in your home:****

- **Keep the area dry** and well ventilated, closing doors and windows when it rains.
- **Install exhaust fans** for bathrooms and kitchen areas and have them vented to outside of the home.
- **Purchase a suitable sized portable room dehumidifier(s)** for the mould or condensation affected areas in your home.

These come in various sizes from a simple wardrobe unit taking out 600ml/day to bedroom/ lounge sized units taking out a massive 12L-28L/day of moisture.

- **It is advisable not to look for a whole of home unit** as they can become quite large and noisy to use. Ideally move 1-3 units around the home, leaving cupboard doors open to help dry contents inside.
- **Look for a dehumidifier specialist on the internet**, such as [Damp Solutions Australia](#), rather than purchasing from electrical stores that usually do not specialize in these matters.

