

The Fear of Mold & Mildew

The fear of mold and mildew has taken on a new life creating havoc not only in the building industry, but also in the insurance industry, real estate sales, the court systems of the nation, and the world of medical science. For example, mold was at the center of a criminal investigation of child endangerment charges in Texas against an insurance company for improper handling of a water damage claim resulting in a house that is now uninhabitable and a family complaining of coughing up blood and suffering from a cognitive dysfunction. The family alleges that neither the insurance company nor the company's expert informed them that the home contained the deadly mold until their health was irreversibly damaged. In other parts of the country, real estate agents fear that mold will be a "deal-breaker" causing potential buyers to walk away from a house because mold has been discovered.

In an article written for Claims Magazine, authors Everette L. Herndon, Jr. and Chin S. Yang, tell us, "The consensus of opinion from the EPA, FEMA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mycologists and microbiologists is that mold may start to grow and spread within 24 to 48 hours in structures damaged by water. Mold can grow exponentially, given the right conditions of temperature, moisture and food sources, such as sheetrock."

What no one in the concrete masonry industry should doubt is that mold can and does start to grow on the surface of concrete masonry products. However, once it has consumed whatever food source was present on the surface, it can go no further. Simply put, concrete masonry does not provide a food source for mold. Further, mold can be cleaned from its surface, an option not available to other construction materials.

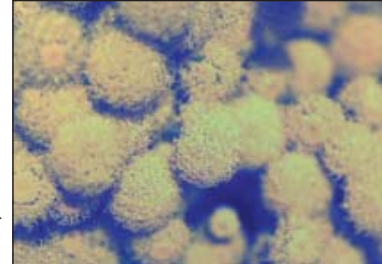
Note, however, in the quote from authors Herndon and Yang from Claims Magazine who specifically identify "sheetrock" as a food source for mold. Mold settles on and quickly permeates "sheetrock" or gypsum walls requiring that the entire wall be torn out and replaced.

Mold and mildew is not a new subject. It was discussed at length in chapters thirteen and fourteen of the book of Leviticus where priests called for houses made of plaster and wood infected with mold be torn down and the debris taken to an unclean place outside the city. In more recent history, articles and studies about mold began appearing in the late 1970s. A 1986 report written by W. A. Croft, who studied a family in Chicago, stated that mold "could be commonly found in homes with water damage," and "could grow undetected behind walls and could grow profusely on sheetrock."

The New York City Department of Health & Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Environmental & Occupational Disease Epidemiology, has published guidelines on assessment and remediation of fungi in indoor environments. These guidelines specifically state that concrete materials that are visibly

moldy can be cleaned and reused. Further, the same guidelines state that porous materials including ceiling tiles, insulation and wallboards should be removed and discarded.

Obviously, all industries involved in construction of buildings must become involved in educating owners, designers, and the public about how to prevent mold and mildew. However, the vast difference between cleaning and reusing a concrete masonry wall versus tearing out and totally replacing a gypsum wall provides a very strong marketing message. Just as NCMA's ongoing fire safety message conveys the fact that "concrete masonry doesn't burn," NCMA's mold message will begin promoting the fact that "concrete masonry can be cleaned." Look for marketing messages from NCMA on the mold and mildew issue to begin appearing in 2003. ■



Mold spores viewed under a microscope.



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