ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

Mold remediation job made home toxic

By Dan Howard
For Trib Total Media

None of us would like to believe that it could be our own home that catches fire, is flooded or torn into splinters by a tornado.

It's always the other person's home that we see on the news. The same is true with homes that become toxic.

The truth is that homes do become toxic, and real people do become deathly ill. It is arbitrary and could happen to any of us.

Technology has brought us new environmental challenges and risks. It also carries new solutions if we know how to use them.

A toxic indoor air problem in a recent real-life case was created by the chemicals that were used in the mold remediation process. You could have this story happen to you.

Imagine that you arrive home from a wonderful winter vacation. The bad news is that the pipes on the top floor burst while you were away. The water ran for days. You have water damage sprawling from the second floor down to the finished basement.

Your insurance company is a major insurance company. They send in a "preferred and approved" contractor. You breathe a little sigh of relief.

You are out of your home for weeks while the restoration work is being done. You hope that the nightmare is over when you get the "all clear" to move home.

You move back in to the home and your family becomes deathly ill. You believe the problem is hidden mold. It isn't.

In this very true story, the toxic chemicals were methylene chloride and formaldehyde.

The methylene chloride was used as a stripping agent so that damaged finishes could be refinished instead of replaced.

That approach saved the insurance company money, but it also poisoned your family.

The equally toxic formaldehyde is common in lower-cost building and flooring materials brought into the home.

New testing methods and remediation processes were used to save this home.

The first problem was identifying the toxins. The remediation company refused to identify the chemicals they used and where they used them. Luckily, specialized testing can identify organic chemicals.

The next hurdle was that the chemical manufacturer and CDC instructions for remediation were to remove the contaminated materials.

PHOTOS: BRIAN MARRA | UN-FLOOD-IT

Heat treatment and ozone equipment clean a toxic chemical contamination.

The remediator would not disclose where the chemicals were used, so to follow the instructions would mean to gut the entire house.

After some research, the solution that would bypass the need to gut the house was heat treatment to accelerate off gassing and ozone treatment to break down the chemicals. These were great ideas that worked.

Many types of exposures can lead to illness

We are finding a wide range of toxic exposures in homes, schools and other buildings.

- Pesticide overuse or misapplication by pest professionals
- Leaking pesticide storage containers
- Defective and imported building materials
- Illegal drug manufacture
- Overuse of industrial strength cleaners
- Gasses from construction over farms and factory sites
- Manufacturing waste and gasses
- Toxins from neighboring businesses
- Improper plumbing systems
- Tight construction
- Defective paints and coatings
- Mold
- Polluted well water
- Farm runoff

Miracles of the human body

The human body really tries to protect us. If it smells bad, tastes bad or feels bad, it is almost always bad for us.

If there is an odor, there is almost always a problem. The bad stuff is like our built-in hazard alarm. Simply put, the nose knows.

Another miracle of the body protecting us is that we usually can handle an environmental exposure. We have immunity defenses. We can absorb small amounts of toxins.

How much we can absorb is dependent on our genetics, past exposures and health histories.

That explains why different people in the same building can have different levels of reaction to the same exposures.

What to do, especially when someone is chemically sensitive

- Read and follow all safety notices, warnings and labels for "safe use."
- Obtain and read the MSDS or SDS for all products used in your environment, including those used by contractors you hire.
- Test any chemical before use in your home. This includes chemicals ranging from cleaners to mold-treatment chemicals. Testing can be as simple as having them on a washcloth and keeping it close to the sensitive person for several days before they are used in the home.
- Avoid new products and construction materials, when possible, with chemically sensitive individuals. As an example, have carpeting kept in a well vented warehouse for several months before installation in a home.
- Many states, such as Pennsylvania, have registries for sensitive individuals. These require pest control operators to provide notice ahead of any treatment of a neighboring home or property.
- Do not use products such as plug-in air fresheners, sprays and scented candles designed to disguise the odors of other bad toxins.

Figuring it out

Odors are our early warning system that something can make us ill. We need to identify and avoid contaminations when possible, especially once someone is ill.

Figuring out the source of odors and chemicals is like CSI for homes. Many options in products, treatments and practices can be explored to avoid environmental risks.

We routinely test for toxins in the range of parts per billion. If you suspect that you are ill from a building, call a professional that understands the wide range that today's exposures can bring and the best solutions to the problems.

For links and additional information about finding help for environmental odors, go to Envirospect.com/odors.

Dan Howard is the owner of Envirospect. For environmental consultation, call 724-443-6653. Email questions to DanielJHowardJr@gmail.com, and follow him on Facebook or via Twitter @DanHoward251.