

ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

Can mold be safely cleaned and contained?

By Dan Howard

FOR TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

You have seen the heartbreaking pictures of a household's entire contents sitting out in the street after a flood.

All of the memories, keepsakes and valuables are stacked in a pile awaiting a Dumpster.

The same story of mass removals of contents goes for many homeowners who have had serious mold problems, especially when one of the family members has gotten sick from mold.

In most instances, there are items that could be saved in any home with mold or flooding problems. The trick is knowing what can be safely cleaned and how to do it.

Whether you are a consumer cleaning your own possessions after a mold problem or victim of a flood, you need to know what contents can be saved and what needs to be thrown out.

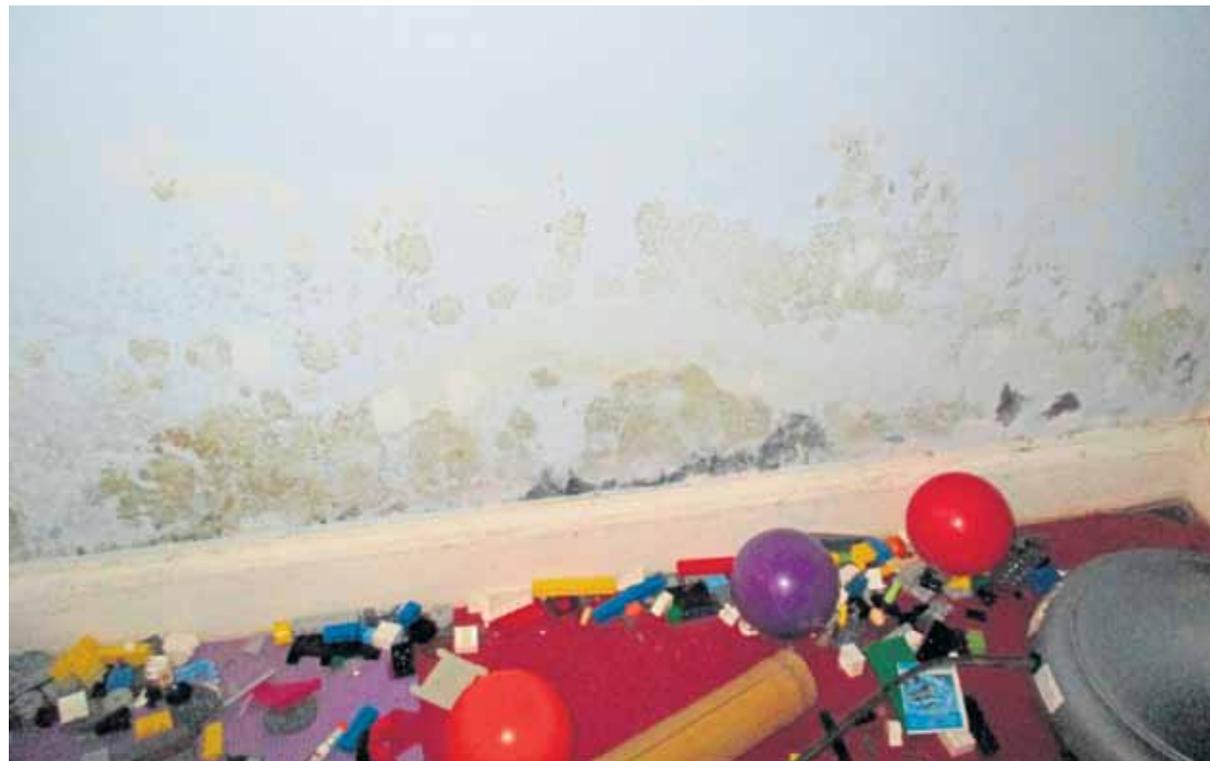
Let's start with an important precaution. Before any cleaning or remediation chemicals are used in a home with sensitive individuals, those people should first be exposed to a sample of the chemicals on a test cloth.

Materials that have a solid surface, such as plastic, glass or metal, but do not have electronics or foam padding, are easily cleaned and preserved. Soap and water or a commercial disinfectant is the simplest cleaning method for residue on contents.

Removal of dry dirt and debris can be done with a HEPA vacuum. This is followed by a topical wipe of a disinfectant.

Commercial products such as Concrobium or Benefact are good examples of the disinfectant. Clorox wipes are an effective wipe available to the nonprofessional. By the way, the disinfectant in Clorox wipes is not Clorox.

Borax mixed at a ratio of one cup to a gallon of water is another environmentally friendly consumer



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If porous and water-contaminated materials are moldy, they likely can't be cleaned effectively.

mold cleaner. Borax is also a particularly good product for use by professionals and consumers alike when working with mold and chemically sensitive persons.

Vinegar is another "people friendly" mold cleaner. The same can be said about some enzyme treatments and herbal products. Most of these choices change the PH of the surface to one that is deadly to mold.

Electronics can usually be preserved with removal of any surface mold and dust and a treatment such as ozone or a total disinfection program.

Ozone is a professional process conducted in an isolated area. Ozone treatment is as toxic to people, pets and plants as it is to mold.

Another process known as "total disinfection" is a hospital-grade, closed-area ultra-fine toxic mist of hydrogen peroxide and silver nitrate. That atmosphere is as toxic to people as it is to mold and must be conducted in a sealed, vacant room.

The paper materials that did not

get wet or damp and do not have visible mold or damage may be preserved with simply HEPA vacuuming. Most paper products, including books, will need to be thrown out if they become moldy or wet from flooding.

For very valuable items, such as a family bible, there is an expensive but effective freeze-drying process that can preserve those items. Ozone treatment might be another effective treatment for books and photos.

Clothing is readily saved by washing in regular laundry detergent unless the fabric has been damaged. Mold will clean out of machine-washable material, but damaged clothing is not restored to its original condition by washing. Borax is a great laundry cleaner that does not usually affect most sensitive individuals.

Major and small appliances that have mold exposure but have not been under water can often be saved with a professional cleaning. Consult a professional about these items before trying to use the appliance. As an example, a computer

hard drive might be removed from a computer and salvaged for use in another computer but could be damaged if it is powered on while in its original device.

All appliances both big and small that have been under any water will need to be replaced. The cost of cleaning some of these items will often exceed the cost of replacement. Operation of water damaged appliances can result in fires, health hazards or recontamination of the home.

Furnaces, hot water tanks, washing machines and the like are total losses if any part of the components have been under water.

Knowing which things will need to be tossed

The short story is if contents are porous and water-contaminated or moldy, they will probably need to be thrown away. This includes cardboard, carpet, padding, stuffed animals and upholstered furnishings. Mattresses and box springs are on that list.

Water-soaked fiberboard will

likely not be able to be cleaned. Fiberboard furnishings that are simply sitting in a contaminated area might be cleanable with the ozone or total disinfection systems, but the value of those items needs to be evaluated relative to the cost of decontamination before deciding to replace or to clean these materials.

Food items that have been in contact or stored in areas with mold or water damage should be thrown away.

Avoiding the spread of mold

Remember back when you were a child and held the dandelion that just went from yellow to the white seeds. You blew on the white seeds and they went flying everywhere! That is what happens to mold when it is disturbed.

If you dry wipe mold, the mold spores spread just like any dry dust. If you use a bagged sweeper that lets the tiny mold spores through the bag, you spread mold just like those white dandelion seeds. The lesson here is that the spores and the dirt and slime that is on surfaces needs to be cleaned without spreading the mold.

Forced air furnaces can redistribute mold through an entire home after the property is cleaned. Furnace ductwork, blowers and cabinets need to be cleaned as a part of any mold remediation.

Some of our possessions are irreplaceable, not because of their cost, but rather because of the memories they hold. Understanding how to protect or restore some of those precious items can be a comfort in the middle of a tragedy.

For links and additional information about finding help for cleaning moldy contents, go to Enviroinspect.com/cleaningmold.

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