

## Investigating Mold in Minnesota Public Schools

### When is mold a concern?

Mold has the potential to affect the health of building occupants when it is allowed to grow and multiply indoors. If you can see or smell mold in the indoor environment, it is a concern.

Mold can colonize and grow when spores encounter moisture from building problems such as flooding, water intrusion, ongoing plumbing leaks or high relative humidity. Once established, the amount of mold can quickly increase and spread if enough moisture is available.

### What are the health effects of indoor mold?

Health effects from mold exposure can range from mild to severe, and susceptibility varies from person to person. Individuals with compromised immune systems, respiratory problems (such as asthma), the elderly and the very young are more likely to be vulnerable. MDH recommends that anyone concerned that they might have health problems due to mold exposure see a medical professional.

The most common symptoms include allergy-like reactions such as eye, nose or throat irritation, runny nose, and rashes. Although less common, more severe reactions such as asthma attacks, hypersensitivity pneumonitis or infections are possible.

### How should a school investigate mold concerns?

The goal of any mold investigation is to locate visible mold growth and determine how to control the underlying moisture problems. School staff should start with the most practical investigation methods, including visual and odor assessments, collecting building history and occupant observations, and using moisture diagnostics. The MDH document “Recommended Best Practices for Mold Investigation in Minnesota Schools” outlines these techniques in more depth.

### Is testing necessary to determine if a school is safe?

MDH **does not** recommend mold testing during the initial response to a mold problem. At this time, there is no scientific consensus on what a safe level of mold is in the indoor environment. Testing has drawbacks. All of the commonly used sampling techniques have limitations in what they can detect and quantify. These methods often give a very unreliable “measurement” of the amount of mold present.

This being said, properly done mold testing can be helpful in certain situations such as evaluating the success of clean-up efforts or finding hidden mold contamination.

## How can you tell if the mold is “toxic”?

The term “toxic mold” is largely a creation of the popular media. Currently, there is no complete list of molds that are harmful to humans. In fact, it is likely that most types of mold can cause health problems for the right person under certain conditions. For this reason, it is not appropriate to test solely to find out specific type of mold present or if the mold present is a so called “toxic” kind.

## Should a school be evacuated when mold is found?

Not necessarily. It is quite normal to find some mold in indoor environments. The decision to move people should involve careful evaluation of a number of factors.

It is the responsibility of school officials to determine if evacuation is needed to protect occupants. MDH suggests considering the following:

1. What areas, if any, should be evacuated?
2. What is the basis of the decision and how will it be communicated?
3. In the event of a partial evacuation, who should leave?
4. What impacts will evacuation or relocation have on students and staff?
5. If people are relocated, is the new location better?
6. What criteria will be used to determine when to re-occupy? How will this decision be communicated?

## How should a mold problem be corrected?

The presence of mold growth indoors is a sign of a problem with the design, operation or maintenance of the building that has created a moisture issue. Correcting the problem means the school needs to investigate the moisture problem and its causes, and then remove the mold contamination. The building needs to be restored to clean conditions.

Ultimately, it is up to the school’s staff to determine what actions are needed to resolve these issues. Small scale contamination often can be addressed by school staff. Larger contaminations may require the help of experienced and trained remediation workers. More in-depth guidance can be found in the MDH document “Recommended Best Practices for Mold Remediation in Minnesota Schools”.

## What is MDH’s role?

MDH **does not** have regulatory authority specific to mold in schools, nor does it perform mold or other indoor air quality tests. The Indoor Air Unit will provide assistance to school districts if requested by school officials. This assistance may range from general information about mold to technical advice about testing, data interpretation and contaminant removal.

Minnesota Department of Health  
Indoor Air Unit  
P.O. Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
(Phone) 651-201-4601  
[Health.indoorair@state.mn.us](mailto:Health.indoorair@state.mn.us)  
[www.health.state.mn.us](http://www.health.state.mn.us)