

Letter to the Editor: A Year After Sandy, Mold Still Threatens Families

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A young woman in Wildwood waits for approval of funds to treat her home that has hazardous mold caused by Hurricane Sandy and now spreading to the second floor.

Many trailers are uninhabitable due to post-Sandy mold, while some homeowners who thought they cleaned up and removed the hazard are now seeing it return.

Sandy's one-year anniversary has come and gone. Yet, thousands of families in New Jersey are still unable to re-occupy homes that have been severely damaged. That damage often includes hazardous molds that should have been treated and removed by now.

Some people who are cleaning up or rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy without a proper respirator for breathing protection now have what is referred to as the "Sandy Cough," and mold is likely to be a primary cause. Those exposed to high mold concentrations without adequate protection may suffer from health reactions such as headaches; nausea; fatigue and exhaustion; burning, irritated or watery eyes; sore throat, hoarseness, sneezing, coughing, or wheezing; chest pain and burning; congestion; dizziness and memory problems; or flu-like reactions.

People with asthma and allergies, those with diseases that compromise their immune systems, and children, the elderly, and pregnant women are particularly susceptible to adverse health reactions and infections after mold exposure. Asthma can be life-threatening if severe and untreated.

Fortunately, there are simple and inexpensive ways for experienced inspectors to check for mold contamination. They check for hidden mold under floors, inside walls and above ceilings and sometimes measure moisture with a hand-held meter. However, due to health concerns, homeowners and volunteers with health problems and without proper training as well as personal protection (PPE) should not personally tackle extensive mold removal in an area larger than a few square feet.

The state, federal government, local officials, and community groups need to educate people about the health effects of mold, as well as safe methods for mold removal. At the same time, agencies need to accelerate funds to those impacted by disasters like Hurricane Sandy to avoid long-term exposure to toxins and to expedite professional clean-up of preventable contamination hazards.

In addition, employers and contractors involved in post-Sandy cleanup and reconstruction must meet their responsibility under the Occupational Safety and Health Act to protect workers from mold and other hazards with proper personal protective equipment such as skin, eye and respiratory protection and training. NIOSH and EPA have provided new practical guidelines available online.

New Jersey residents already faced the immediate, disastrous effects of Hurricane Sandy. Urgent action is needed now to prevent exposure to mold and other hazards from continuing to create new damage to our health and safety and our homes.

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