

# MOULD AND YOUR HEALTH

## INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

### WHAT IS MOULD?



Mould is microscopic fungi (mushrooms) found in nature and carried into buildings by drafts, people and pets. Once inside, mould growth can occur in the presence of sufficient water or moisture and nutrient-rich substrates (food source) like wood, cardboard, or drywall.

If mould growth is limited and removed regularly, it generally does not pose a serious problem. However, if growth is significant, breathable particles are scattered into the surrounding air which can, in some cases, lead to health problems.

### WHAT EFFECTS CAN MOULD HAVE ON HEALTH?



The most common health problems affecting those exposed to mould are:

- irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat;
- nasal discharge, sinus congestion, sneezing, frequent cold-like symptoms;
- difficulty breathing (chronic cough, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest);
- dermatitis;
- increased frequency and severity of asthma attacks.

The nature and intensity of these symptoms may vary depending on the type of mould, the severity of the contamination, and the vulnerability of those exposed. However, it is important to understand that mould is not

necessarily the underlying cause when a student or a staff member has these symptoms. Other circumstances or behaviours may trigger these symptoms.

The reactions of those exposed to mould vary depending on the person's health status and age, and the amount of time exposed to the affected area. In general, individuals who fall within the following groups are more sensitive to mould exposure:

- people with allergies, asthma, chronic respiratory diseases, or hypersensitivity;
- infants, toddlers, and young children;
- the elderly;
- people with compromised immune systems due to chemotherapy, a recent transplant, HIV, AIDS, or other health issues.

### HOW IS THE PRESENCE OF MOULD CONFIRMED?



The school board is responsible for determining whether any of its buildings have a mould problem. The board must first gather information on the building: history of water infiltrations, water damage or excess moisture, as well as repairs and remedial measures taken. The board should also systematically collect complaints related to children's and staff members' health.

If the information suggests there could be a problem, the next step is to perform a visual inspection of the building (floors, ceilings, walls, masonry, roof, etc.). In the absence of any visible signs of mould, it may be necessary to conduct an intrusive inspection (e.g. making a hole in a wall to see whether there is mould behind it).

## ARE AIR OR DUST ANALYSES WORTH IT?

Air or dust analyses to identify or measure mould are not generally required to solve a problem. When mould is visible or there are signs of mould, experts recommend against testing, as tests do not give additional information as to required interventions. A visual inspection completed with

the measurement of building material moisture levels and, if needed, an intrusive investigation, is much more useful than analyses in terms of identifying the cause of the problem and selecting the necessary corrective measures.

## DOES THE PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT ALWAYS CONDUCT AN INVESTIGATION?

An epidemiological study makes it possible to determine the proportion of individuals who have symptoms that may be related to mould, but such a study does not make it possible to ascertain whether mould is actually the cause of these symptoms. Therefore, such studies are only useful under certain circumstances for example, when the building

inspection is inconclusive or when symptoms persist after corrective measures have been taken.

The decision to conduct an epidemiological study is always made after examining all of the available information. The public health department only investigates cases in which the results would be helpful in deciding which measures should be taken.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ACHIEVE GOOD AIR QUALITY IN A SCHOOL?

- Follow the ventilation recommendations, particularly opening windows frequently.
- Avoid keeping a lot of plants in the classroom due to their moist potting soil (mould) and pollen (allergies).
- Do not compost indoors as it is a potential major source of mould.
- Do not bring animals to school due to allergies.
- Avoid clutter so that the room can be properly cleaned and to prevent the accumulation of dust.
- Store materials and equipment in such a way that air can circulate, thereby reducing the risk of condensation and mould growth.
- Avoid placing furniture, boxes, and other objects against exterior walls.
- Only use craft and science products in well-ventilated spaces intended for these purposes.
- Avoid using scented products and choose cleaning products with low emissions.
- Report any signs of water infiltration or leaks to the school's administration.

### WHAT ARE THE OTHER CAUSES OF SYMPTOMS?

Mould is not the only factor that can impact the health of building occupants. In fact, many conditions at school can cause symptoms that are similar to those caused by mould:

- respiratory viruses (cold, flu, etc.);
- animals or carpets in the classroom;
- improper temperature or humidity;
- pet hair on clothes;
- clutter;
- arts and crafts products in art classes (glue, paint, etc.) or chemicals in science classes (e.g. chemistry and biology);
- use of air fresheners or other scented products or cleaning products.

### WHAT DO YOU DO IF SYMPTOMS OCCUR?

The parent or staff member must notify the school's administration to report the situation. The school has the necessary tools at its disposal to help the person affected.

If a student or staff member experiences a health problem that they are concerned about, they can call 8-1-1 for Info-Santé or see their family physician.