Break The Mold To Save Your Breath

Safety Talk

Respiratory hazards in the workplace are often chemical vapors or toxic gases, but the air you breathe can also carry biological hazards – viruses, dusts, bacteria and spores – that can make you sick.

While anthrax concerns have increased public awareness of respiratory biological hazards, there are many other common biological agents affecting workers every day.

This safety talk will discuss a few of these hazards. What you need to do with this information is find out if there are biological respiratory hazards in your workplace, and learn how to protect yourself.

One such hazard involves certain kinds of molds. A mold is a microscopic fungus. There are many thousands of species and they are found just about everywhere. They are an important part of the decomposition process that breaks down plant and animal matter and turns it into soil. You likely have seen mold on decaying plants in the garden and on cardboard in damp basements. The furry, blue-green-gray growth warning you not to eat old leftovers in the refrigerator is also a type of mold.

Most mold is harmless or even beneficial to people. However, some molds can be a serious respiratory hazard when the airborne spores are breathed in, causing irritation to the nose, lungs and eyes.

Histoplasmosis, for example, is an infection caused by inhaling the spores of a fungus found in bird or bat droppings. A chronic lung disease resembling tuberculosis can develop, and it can be fatal. Histoplasmosis can affect poultry workers, maintenance workers, loading dock crews and others who work around bird or bat

roosts. The risk of histoplasmosis is one of the good reasons for discouraging birds and bats from colonizing buildings such as industrial plants, warehouses and barns. Cleanup should involve a good sealed vacuuming system and approved respiratory protection.

Another potentially fatal illness is caused by a black mold called Stachybotrys chartarum. The lungs bleed chronically, causing a cough, congestion and anemia. This mold is of particular danger to infants exposed in their homes, as well as adults with immune system deficiencies.

Various molds are also common suspects in building-related illnesses, causing fatigue, headache and respiratory problems.

So how can you protect yourself from respiratory exposure to a harmful mold or other respiratory biohazards?

- Learn about the risks related to your region and industry, as well as risks related to your own state of health.
- Find out how to protect yourself by avoiding exposure and using personal protective equipment.
- Try to eliminate mold in your home and workplace. A moldy, musty smell is good evidence mold is present. Physically searching for mold is recognized as the most useful first step rather than attempting to monitor the air for mold spores.
- Scrub non-porous surfaces with a mixture of one cup (250 milliliters) of bleach to one gallon (four liters) of water. Protect your lungs, eyes and skin during this work.
- Discard moldy materials that are porous because you won’t be able to get them clean. Upholstered furniture, floor coverings, fabrics, paper and other materials should be tossed out if they get damp and moldy.

Are there any biological hazards in the air you breathe at work? Find out, and learn how to protect yourself.