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The CHEC Report

Molds in School

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McKinley Elementary School, Fairfield, Connecticut. East Pennsboro High School, Enola, Pennsylvania. Whitaker Middle School, Portland, Oregon. These schools and many others like them have a story to tell – kids getting sick from school are not isolated incidents.

In schools across the country, mold has been suspected in the illness and deaths of students. It is a well-known fact that mold can adversely affect human health, and precedent suggests that the deteriorating conditions in schools are at least partly responsible for children's poor health. To determine whether specific health outcomes are indeed the direct result of mold exposure in classrooms is not currently within the realm of scientific understanding. Even the science behind why molds cause certain health problems is not well understood.

Fatigue, headaches, asthma, and irritation of the eyes and nose are common symptoms associated with exposure to mold. "Toxic" molds, so called because they can release toxic substances into the air called mycotoxins, are not necessarily more harmful than other mold varieties, as nearly all molds can cause health problems. Children are especially susceptible to mold exposures, and those with mold allergies or pre-existing asthma are often at greater risk.

Inadequate maintenance and poor construction are the main causes of mold growth in classrooms. Water damage stemming from plumbing problems and/or leaky roofs can lead to serious mold infestations. The problem can become even greater when poorly ventilated classrooms trap excess moisture, or when molds contaminate the ventilation system. Mold can grow anywhere – ceiling tiles, carpets, walls, air filters, ductwork – and will continue to grow as long as it has access to moisture and a food source, such as wood, paper, cloth, or wallboard.

The good news is that several organizations are involved in improving the school environment so that mold does not continue to pose a threat to children. The Healthy Schools Network recommends steps parents can take to influence their children's schools to investigate, prevent, and remedy latent mold problems. Because mold is one component of a larger environmental health problem encompassing poor indoor air quality (IAQ), school districts with mold problems can benefit from obtaining the *IAQ Tools for Schools* kit from the U.S. EPA. Additionally, in consultation with the Collaborative for High Performance Schools in California, school districts can incorporate design elements that facilitate good indoor air quality. Elementary schools in the New Jersey and the New York and Philadelphia metro areas can contact Jason Earle at Lab Results LLC, based in Princeton, to handle mold detection – a service that is free of charge and unique in its approach.

The latest detective in the search for mold is not your local public health official or IAQ consultant, but rather your canine companion. Dogs, like Oreo, are the new master sleuths in sniffing out mold in schools. With the ability to investigate hard-to-reach places, dogs can save schools both time and money. It seems like the logical next step given dogs' aptitude for finding almost anything, including bombs, drugs, money, weapons, termites, accelerants, and even people. The Mold Dog concept is also gaining credence in the scientific community. At the IAQ 2001 conference sponsored by American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE), researchers presented a paper on *How to Find Hidden Microbial Growth With a Mold Dog*.

Everyone, even dogs it appears, has a stake in protecting children from moldy classrooms. CNN Headline News has reported on a possible link between the illnesses and deaths of children and the school environment. With the help of school personnel and the resources referenced above, parents concerned about this possible connection could be the largest impetus behind influencing maintenance and construction practices in schools and for advancing mold science.

For more information see:
CHECList Mold & Moisture control
checnet.org Mold Basics: Resources in the HealtheHouse
healthyschools.org
epa.gov/iaq/schools/tools4s2.html
LabResultsLLC.com