THE NEXT MENACE IS MOLD

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When Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters poured into **the** Gulf Coast saturating walls, shoes, sofas, floors, and roofs billions of dormant **mold** spores woke up.

Now, fueled by moisture and temperature, those spores are growing furiously. For **the** buildings left standing by **the** winds and waters; for **the** houses that escaped serious damage from **the** toxic soup of bacteria and chemicals still sloshing in Katrina's wake, **the next** plague coming, experts say, **is mold**.

"These are **the** most successful organisms on **the** Earth. . . . They have this amazing ability to [survive]," said Michael Rinaldi, director of **the** Fungus Testing Laboratory and professor of pathology and medicine at **the** University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. "Many of those houses are useless, they are going to have to be rebuilt."

Mold is a type of fungus that can weaken buildings, make people sick, and streak walls and baseboards with black and green discolorations that can be nearly impossible to scrub clean. While debate continues over how dangerous household **molds** may be, people with allergies, asthma, or weakened immune systems can suffer severe respiratory problems when they breathe in spores. Some fungal organisms feed on wood for their growth, leaving a gooey, structurally unsound beam behind.

Residents in hot and humid New Orleans have long lived with **the** creep of **mold** and fungus everywhere from bathrooms to barroom walls, keeping it at bay with dehumidifiers, air conditioners and bleach.

But day-to-day humidity levels as sweaty as they make people feel are not nearly as hospitable to **mold** growth, as **the** last two weeks have been. Moisture has crept into crevices of homes, schools, and businesses since Katrina struck **the** Gulf Coast on Aug. 29. Most air conditioners and dehumidifiers haven't been turned on since because of **the** lack of electricity. No one can reach **the** walls to coat them with bleach. And **the mold** has kept on multiplying.

Mold had already begun to spawn in Sandy Guild's spacious Gulfport, Miss., home when she returned to it just days after **the** storm. In each spot, **the mold** started out gray then turned black and spread like a weed, she said. Guild's husband **is** an architect and she knows about **the** dangers of **mold**, so she and her family worked furiously to rip out all **the** sheetrock and insulation on **the** flooded first floor of **the** house, leaving only **the** studs. She bleached her kitchen cabinets.

"I had to get it out," said Guild, who owns a gift shop. "It was going up **the** walls and up **the** doors. I feel sorry for a lot of people who don't even have sheetrock out [by now]; they are going to be in trouble."

After floods, federal agencies often urge homeowners to strip homes of wet carpets and furniture and dry **the** building out within 48 hours to stop **mold** infestation but there are no guidelines for what to do with a house that has been partly submerged for weeks.

"**The** problem we are wrestling with **is** even if we eliminate **the** water . . . there will still be moisture present because we don't have air conditioning or a way to dry it out," said Michael McGinnis, **the** director of **the** Medical Mycology Research Center at **the** University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. "**The mold** will get into **the** cracks in **the** ceiling, behind **the** paint. It really creates difficulty because there **is** going to be lots and lots of **mold** growing."

Mold acts as nature's recycler, digesting dead or decaying material in dark, damp places to allow new growth

to take hold. In existence for hundreds of millions of years, **mold** spores are among **the** most resilient and common organisms on Earth.

When a **mold**'s environment goes dry, its spores enter a kind of hibernation, able to sometimes exist for decades in an inactive state. These microscopic dry spores are lightweight, and wind blows them virtually everywhere into homes, businesses, and schools; onto furniture, countertops, and rugs. In dry conditions, they're mostly invisible but can still make some people with allergies sneeze, cough, and rub their itchy eyes.

With enough moisture, **mold** spores can germinate in just hours and begin eating wood, sheetrock, wallpaper glues, and other organic material that are in **the** home. Within days, a few spores can produce millions more, which are then carried to other locations by air currents. By **the** time **mold is** visible which can take from a day to several weeks after germination it often has taken root in walls and may be impossible to get out.

Companies that offer dry-out services say Gulf Coast residents and business owners are already contacting them, but it's unclear if any regime of drying, bleaching, and disinfecting will make **the** structures salvageable.

Mark Decherd of Dryout Inc., a national company that rehabilitates water-damaged homes, said his company has already received more than 300 calls from Gulf Coast homeowners. He said he's unsure what, if anything, he can do for them.

Scientists worry many poor homeowners will spend tens of thousands of dollars attempting to get rid of **mold**, only to find out their efforts failed.

In Metairie, La., which was hit hard by floodwaters, **mold is** beginning to spider walls not only where water once was, but throughout homes.

"**The mold** keeps going up and up," said Bharti Patel, who returned to her house a week ago. "We're just surrounded by **mold**."

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