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behind fittings, or in the loft. It could be at home or work, and could spread through air conditioning and heating units.”

The extent of hidden mould is also unknown; in 2008, French scientists found that one in five of the rooms they tested was highly contaminated with mould, even though it couldn't be seen.<sup>1</sup>

#### What does mould do?

It is widely accepted that living with mould can make us ill. A recent review of studies reported that 98% of 114 studies between 2011 and 2018 investigating the link between mould and “adverse human health effects” supported the link.<sup>2</sup>

First and foremost, mould affects breathing: the NHS states that “if you have damp and mould in your home you're more likely to have respiratory problems, respiratory infections, allergies or asthma”.<sup>3</sup>

People in damp or mouldy homes are 40% more likely to have asthma,<sup>4</sup> and asthma sufferers may experience worse symptoms. In extreme cases, mould can grow in asthmatics' lungs.<sup>5</sup>

But it's not just asthma; several other less-common conditions have been strongly linked to mould and dampness; from respiratory conditions to hypersensitivity pneumonitis, allergic rhinitis and sinusitis.

Allergic reactions to mould are quite common, so inhaling or touching mould spores may cause sneezing, a runny nose, red eyes, and a skin rash.<sup>3</sup> And because mould affects the immune system, those exposed to mould may get ill regularly and find viruses and infections difficult to fight off.<sup>3</sup>

#### What mould might do

Some studies have also suggested a link between mould and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). In 2013, researchers found mycotoxins in the urine of 93% of the CFS patients they tested, versus none (at the limits of detection) in a control group.<sup>6</sup> However, there's doubt over the reliability of urine mycotoxin tests<sup>7</sup> and, in mainstream medical approaches, CFS is not generally associated with mould.

But some go one step further, advocating for symptoms related to mould exposure to be recognised as an

## FEELING GROTTY? MOULD MIGHT BE WHY

Mould has been linked to a range of symptoms, from asthma to fatigue, and we're particularly susceptible during the winter months, writes *Hatty Willmoth*



You might not like cold, damp weather — but mould does.

When windows are shut for warmth, humid air is trapped indoors and condensation forms more easily on cold surfaces; causing damp to set in and mould to thrive.

We're extra susceptible now because cost of living increases make us less likely to turn on radiators and tumble dryers, in favour of sporting woolly jumpers and hanging wet clothes on clothes horses. Unfortunately, though, these money-saving, eco-friendly switches encourage mould to grow.

That's a problem because mould can make us ill.

#### What is mould?

Mould is a natural fungus. It can be green, black, grey, and even red or orange, and can grow in patches on virtually any surface. It's everywhere and relatively harmless in the natural environment, but in our homes with more limited airflow, it can be a significant indoor pollutant.

Mould is more than what you see. The visible stuff emits invisible spores, particles and cell fragments, which are often toxic. Spores, like seeds, float through the air and deposit on surfaces

#### IN BRIEF

- Mould is a natural fungus that can be a significant indoor pollutant.
- Mould problems are generally caused by other issues, such as structural faults or condensation.
- Respiratory conditions and allergic reactions are linked to mould.
- Mould may cause all sorts of other symptoms, but this is debated.
- Getting rid of mould can be tricky.

to create new mould colonies. These, and toxic gases emitted by mould — called mould toxins or ‘mycotoxins’ — can make us unwell.

#### Where is mould?

Jan Clementson, a nutritional therapy and lifestyle medicine practitioner with a specialist interest in mould, says that contamination mainly occurs due to “exposure to water-damaged buildings”. Where mould accumulates in large amounts, it's often down to bigger, structural problems — a leaky tap, perhaps, or a damaged roof, or dodgy exterior wall.

“The mould may not be visible,” she says. “It could be inside of the walls, behind wallpaper, in a basement,

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

- Keep lids on pans when boiling food.
- Wipe down surfaces where condensation has appeared.
- Use a squeegee to get rid of condensation from windows and shower screens.
- Wipe away moisture after baths and showers.
- Open windows just a fraction in the morning, to allow air to circulate.
- Encourage ventilation with extractor fans, dehumidifiers and open windows.
- Remove and clean washing powder drawers to prevent mould from growing.
- Wipe under the seals of washing machine doors.
- Use a high-temperature wash with washing machine cleaner once every three months.

illness called 'mould sickness'.

Clementson says 'mould sickness' is "one of the worst environmental biotoxin illnesses [illnesses relating to toxic living substances] because it affects so many bodily systems".

"It's really more like a collection of symptoms affecting multiple systems, sometimes with named health conditions," she says.

"Mould-related illness is not only a spore-based illness, meaning symptoms caused from exposure to mould spores and spore fragments; it also includes symptoms from off-gassed mould chemicals [mould chemicals that are gradually released into the air as gases] and mycotoxins. Most people are not aware of just how toxic it can be in the body."

Outside the medical mainstream, 'mould sickness' has been associated with a vast array of symptoms, including fatigue, gut issues, pain and frequent urination.

**"...even the experts don't necessarily agree..."**

However, reversing the effects of mould exposure is as debated as the illness itself. Clementson says: "One of the key things at the start is to get the toxins out of the skin first, via saunas, Epsom salt baths, sweating. This helps to reduce the toxic load and reduce inflammation."

It has also been suggested that dietary elimination of gluten and "mycotoxin-rich" foods (such as wheat, barley, rice, oats, rye, peanuts and brazil nuts) and amylose-rich foods

(such as sugar and alcohol),<sup>8</sup> may be beneficial, although the effectiveness of this is unclear.

Clementson recommends beginning with nutrition. "Clearing mould from the body can be a time-consuming, complicated and challenging process — even the experts don't necessarily agree how to do it," she says. "Although it's very clear that body systems need to be supported first before [embarking on] antifungal regimes."

It can be complicated, she says, because mould affects the body in so many ways, so there can be multiple nutrient deficiencies to address.

"[There] has to be an individualised approach," she says, "a lifestyle approach combined with nutrition is required: getting someone onto a good, wholefood diet that contains a lot of plant foods as well as good-quality proteins and fats."

### Remove that mould

At least everybody agrees that mould exposure should end — but removing mould is tricky. Dead mould remains hazardous, and scrubbing away at a large build-up may release toxic particulates into the air.<sup>9</sup> The objective, then, shouldn't be to kill mould, but to remove and reduce contamination.

Often, that means addressing the underlying problem; fixing that leaky tap, repairing that roof, or repointing that exterior wall.

If there's a lot of mould, you can employ a professional to remove it, perhaps with the help of a national grant.<sup>10</sup> However, be discerning with whom you employ, because anyone can offer 'remediation' services without a license.

Sometimes — particularly in the case of very mouldy soft furnishings such as

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rugs or armchairs — you may need to throw items out.

If there's just a little mould, you can probably remove it yourself — although here again there are issues of toxicity. Especially effective at ridding surfaces of mould are detergent or bleach,<sup>11</sup> but strong chemicals can also be harmful.

Clementson suggests: "If it's a small amount that can appear in the bathroom or around the sink, then clean it off with natural products, such as using an antifungal essential oil such as tea tree, basil, jasmine or lemongrass.

"Add the essential oil to a mix of water and apple cider vinegar and wipe down the surfaces. Properly ventilate the room or home; open all windows."

It may seem daunting to open the windows on a chilly winter's day — even for a few minutes — but these simple steps can help to keep mould at bay.

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