

# Indoor Air Quality FAQs

## **What are my rights as a renter when mold caused by leaks is growing in my apartment?**

Leaks from outside or plumbing are clearly the Landlord's (LL) responsibility. The tenant needs to notify the LL immediately in writing that the leak exists. The tenant needs to try and get mold food out of the way of the leak, move personal belongings away. It is very important that the LL take action right away to stop the leak, clean up any mold, dry all the building materials and then put things back together. Delay will lead to mold growth, which can happen within a couple days. See the [Landlord/Tenant Act for WA State](#) for details of LL and tenant responsibilities and protocol for communication and response times.

**Are there any government agencies that will help me correct the mold issues in my apartment?** Not as far as we know. Use our videos and handouts available on our indoor air program page to correct ambient moisture (relative humidity) conditions that are leading to condensation caused mold. Notify LL or property manager if source of moisture causing mold is from plumbing or building envelope leaks.

**Will you test my apartment for mold?** No, we do not test for mold. Testing is a last resort, anyway. You typically do not need to know what kind of mold is growing (scotch tape pressed onto mold growth and then placed in a clean zip lock baggie to sample) or what airborne mold levels are (Air- O-Cell cassette 150 liter sample inside vs outside to sample air). If you can see or smell mold, you have it and need to get rid of it. See our indoor air page on our website for resources or contact [The Building Performance Center](#) though the Opportunity Council if you have further questions.

You could also contact Peter "That Mold Expert" who does work in Skagit Island and Whatcom counties.

Mold Solutions NW  
Peter Kakoczky CMI, CMRC  
425-313-5900  
[www.dontfearmold.com](http://www.dontfearmold.com)  
...so you can breathe easy!

**Will you test the air quality in my home?** No, we do not provide testing services. If you suspect you have issues, watch our [Asthma Trigger Control video](#) on line to get a primer on factors important to residential indoor air quality. Testing is a last resort. Try the suggested behaviors outlined in the video. And be sure to ventilate, air out, the house thoroughly every day at a minimum.

**What is the difference between mold and mildew?** There is no difference. Mildew is just a term, like calling a plant a weed. Mildew generally refers to light powdery mold on leather, fabric or other belongings.

**Can mold make me sick?** Yes. See ["Is Indoor Mold Exposure a Threat to Health?" by Dr. Harriet Ammann](#) for more information.

**My home is clean and dry, but I am sick when home and better when I go away for a few days. What might be going on?** Check the crawlspace below the living area for excess moisture. About 40 percent of the air you breathe, especially in cold weather, comes from the crawlspace, pulled up by the force of warm air rising. If the crawlspace is wet, also check the attic for condensation and mold on the cold sheathing. A wet crawlspace can keep sensitive people sick upstairs.

**How do I clean up mold?** See "[Mold Remediation in Occupied Homes](#)" from Building Science Corporation. This brief paper, by three of the best in the business, deals with mold cleanup depending on the size of the problem. Everything from a little bit on a wall to a massive contamination requiring a gut job and experienced abatement personnel.

**The landlord just painted over the mold I complained about. Is this proper procedure?** Ideally, we want to wash mold off surfaces with soapy water, get the materials dry quickly to avoid recurrence. Often, if mold is growing on drywall, it is because the drywall is saturated with moisture. Painting over mold on damp drywall will not correct the issue. Mold will also grow on the unpainted, paper reverse side. The drywall should really be cut out and replaced, using appropriate precautions depending on the quantity of mold involved. You may need to protect workers and protect personal belongings in the space from contamination using negative pressure enclosures for the work zone.

**My place smells musty but I don't see any mold. What can I do to figure this out?** Check under the house for a damp crawlspace. Forty percent of the air you breathe upstairs originates in the crawl space below. Pull off outlet cover plates and sniff wall cavities, searching for a stronger source of the ambient musty smell. If you find a stronger source of smell, open the drywall down low with a hole saw or drywall knife, perhaps behind the baseboard, and inspect the reverse side of the drywall for mold growth.

**I have mold growing in the corners of my bedroom and the landlord won't do anything about it except give me bleach. What are my rights?** Attorneys tell us to refer you to the [WA State Landlord Tenant laws](#). That means complaining in writing and allowing appropriate time for corrections by the landlord. If the landlord fails to do his or her job, then the renter has options: pay rent into escrow instead of to the landlord; hire someone to make the corrections and deduct it from your rent. But you better be sure you are on solid ground before assuming you can withhold rent or hire workers.

**Why won't the health department come support me against my landlord regarding my mold issues?** The role of the health department is to assist with public health issues. Like AIDS, SARS, MERSA, not like individuals with mold problems. The health departments in our State have lost lots of funding due to tax initiatives. Lawyers rule indoors and you are largely on your own, except for the information regarding prevention and cleanup we have to offer.

**My clothes in my closet are covered in mold and the landlord won't do anything about it. What can I do?** The mold in your closet is due to excess moisture in the air condensing on cold clothes. Is the closet against an exterior wall? Keeping the closet door closed traps the cold from outside in the closet and prevents warm air from the house getting in. However, moisture in the air from your lifestyle (relative humidity) will seek the cold (moisture in the air always moves from warm to cold and from more to less). If the temperature of the clothes is below dew point temperature (the temperature at which

moisture in the air will condense on a surface at a given air temperature and relative humidity), the clothes by definition will be wet. Anything that gets wet will allow the mold spores that were already waiting on the surface of the clothing for moisture to germinate and grow on the cloth.

**I want to get the air quality I my house tested. Who can do that for me?** We don't recommend any testing for mold, either of bulk samples you can see or of ambient air in a room you suspect is contaminated. A thorough visual inspection is always more effective at finding mold. Only lawyers and perhaps doctors might want to document what kind of mold is growing or what might be floating in the air. We encourage you to save your money and spend it on the fix, the cleanup or repair, or to replace moldy stuff you have to throw away. If you are convinced you need/want air sampling done, the samples will cost about \$60 each for analysis, not including the sample cassettes or labor for the technician doing the sampling. Always compare inside to outside, so collect at least two samples. Ideally, the results will indicate that the mold airborne indoors reflects the same mix of molds found outside, but in smaller numbers. Finding an airborne mold indoors that is not outdoors could point to an indoor mold growth issue.

**Ever since I moved into this house, my family has been coughing and have upper respiratory issues that are relieved when we spend a weekend away. Could this be due to something in the house?** Yes, that is very possible. Every situation is a little different, but if the house is clean and dry, I would start by inspecting the crawlspace under the house for moisture issues. About 40 percent of the air you breathe upstairs in the winter comes from the crawlspace. If the house is a rental, you never know what activities might have occurred there due to prior renters (methamphetamine smoking or cooking, for example). If symptoms persist, plan on moving out as soon as possible and notify your landlord in writing that, for whatever reason, you are sick at the house and fine elsewhere. It is not your financial responsibility to pay for the science required to figure out exactly what is going on.

**My place is moldy and when I complained, the landlord said he is going to evict me. What do I do?** First of all, make sure you comply with the [Landlord/Tenant Act of WA State](#) (contact the attorney general's office for a copy). Do all of your communication with the landlord in writing, if possible, so you have a record of what and when you said anything. Contact an attorney if you are being treated unfairly. If you can't afford an attorney, try calling the [NW Justice Project in Bellingham](#) at 360-734-8680 for assistance. Read our [landlord/tenant mold guidance](#) and determine who is at fault for the mold. It is possible the source of moisture is self-inflicted condensation, out of the control of the landlord. If your mold is due to leaks through the building envelope or plumbing and you have previously notified the landlord in writing of the leaks, the mold is clearly the landlord's fault. Take photos. Get witnesses.

One number to call is the [NW Justice Project in Bellingham. 360-734-8680](#). Kelly Owen is one of their attorneys.