

Commentary... No place like home

By **T. Lee Brown**
Correspondent

Whether it's the old farmhouse you grew up in or Grandma's slick new condo, there's no place like home. After three days hiking or three weeks on vacation, it sure feels good to snuggle up in your own bed. But what if your house is making you sick?

File this one under "It Happened to Me." A few years back I was dimly aware that indoor air quality was a problem in some big offices and in the mold-blackened houses left in Hurricane Katrina's wake. What I didn't understand is that many buildings commonly contain mold, bacteria, and allergens in every flavor imaginable—even in dry climates.

I didn't know that some people can be made very sick by these indoor gremlins while others walk away unscathed, or that others experience only minor symptoms like sore throat, muscle pain, and sinus problems.

So when I was crushed by a series of health problems, it didn't occur to me to check our Portland basement for answers. I got chest X-rays and blood draws. I took medications for migraine, anxiety, and muscle pain. My doctors and I blamed age, hormones, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, the stress of parenting a young child and caregiving for my injured husband. Then one day I found myself being pushed through PDX airport in a wheelchair, our preschooler running alongside. This situation was entirely unacceptable. I had to search harder for answers.

What followed was a lot of research, testing, connecting with patients similar to me, and searching for professionals who understood these issues. I learned that indoor air quality and reduced mold exposure were key to my health.

Mold grows in all climates, I found. Mold is everywhere. It is a natural part of our earth's cycle of life and death. "Dry molds" grow in desert buildings and desert soils. Mold is common in air conditioners and vehicles. My body had become intolerant of mold, which meant it was pretty darned hard for me to exist — anywhere.

Step by step, I addressed the issues — in the house, in our possessions, and in myself. Four years later, living in Sisters, I feel a heck of a lot better.

Folks often ask me how to make their homes healthier. Since I'm not a healthcare

provider, contractor, or scientist, be sure to run my suggestions past a trusted professional before taking action.

Clear the Air

Get those ducts and furnaces cleaned! Even in a clean and dry home, airborne particles and volatile organic compounds can accumulate from forest fires, pet dander, dust mites, pollen, mold, bacteria, and smoke. These can cause allergic reactions, stuffy noses, and serious health issues.

Regular cleaning and maintenance of HVAC systems, furnaces, air ducts, fans, and chimneys can make a big difference. Check manufacturers' instructions. Generally, ducts and furnaces should be professionally cleaned and inspected annually.

Additional HEPA air purifiers can help. My family's go-to brand is BlueAir, best used with their SmokeStop filters. We vacuum the unit with a HEPA vacuum, change filters every six months, and only use brand-name replacement filters. We've also found it worth the investment to buy the expensive, high-quality filters for our HVAC. Our air was surprisingly clean during the Milli Fire last year, which raged just a mile or so from our house.

Water Intrusion? Act immediately.

Burst pipe? Ice dam? The longer you wait to dry out, the more susceptible you are to a costly mold removal and remediation project (this can even happen within 24 hours). Call a professional remediation company that can bring in negative air pressure machines, HEPA air scrubbers, and high-volume dehumidifiers. Call your homeowners' insurance company right away, particularly if the water damage was caused by a burst pipe or overflowing washer; many policies do not cover longer-term leaks, seepage, or flooding.

Clean Your Surfaces

TrueHEPA™ sealed vacuum cleaners — such as those made by Miele — trap mold

spores and can make a big difference in air quality. Just plain "HEPA" won't cut it. If you have a basement or storage room, vacuum everything including tops of storage bins, walls, ceilings, and floors once a month. Bins may be wiped down lightly with a mixture of vinegar and water (20 percent vinegar; use it lightly or on a damp cloth). In the Sisters area, Mandy Miller provides spotless, allergen-aware house-cleaning.

Test for Mold

Musty or funky smells? Visible mold anywhere? Water damage, current or past? These are all good reasons to get tested. Order an ERMI test from Mycometrics, collect a dust sample yourself, and mail it off to their lab. They'll identify DNA fragments indicating specific mold species. The mycometrics.com website isn't the greatest, but the experts I spoke to recommend this company above all others.

If problem molds are detected, consider bringing in a local company for an airborne mold spore test. Some air-testing professionals may scoff at DNA testing. Both types of testing were useful to our family.

Investigate Your Symptoms

Testing your house is controversial enough. Testing your body is even more difficult. Mold illness is a controversial area of medicine that is not widely understood.

On the less controversial side: Similar to developing hay fever, some people develop mold allergies. Exposures to "toxic black mold" (*Stachybotrys chartarum*) cause systemic health problems even in the healthiest people. It can kill you, and it's very hard to get rid of. Many affected patients lose their homes and all their possessions. The disease *Aspergillosis* can be seen on a chest X-ray as molds from the genus *Aspergillus* colonize a person's lungs. Conventional treatment involves systemic anti-fungal medications with

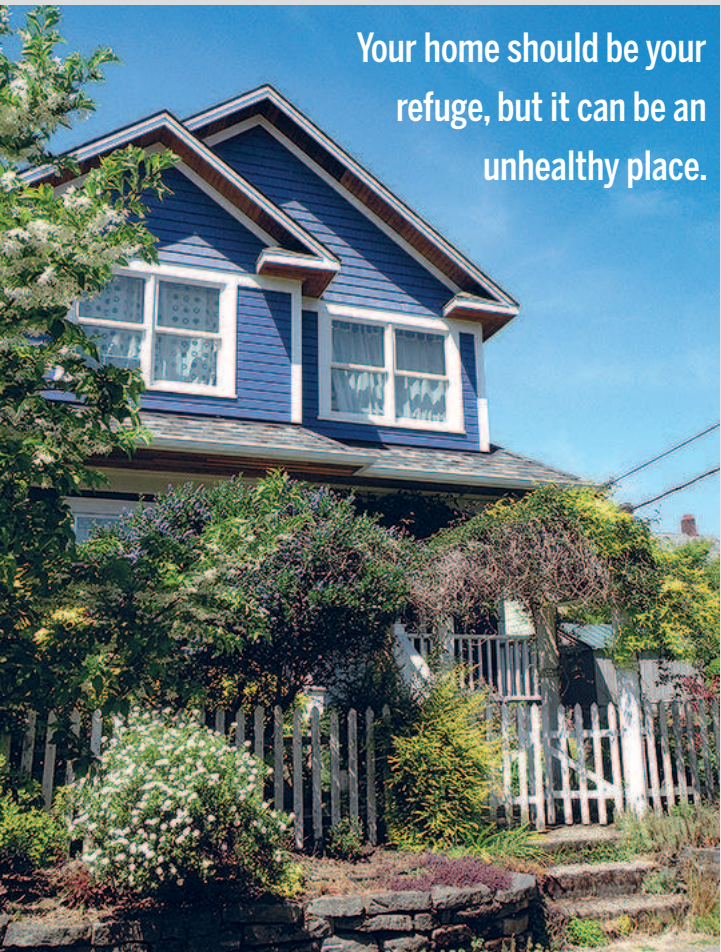


PHOTO BY TL BROWN

Your home should be your refuge, but it can be an unhealthy place.

serious side effects.

When you move beyond those basic facts, things get murkier. There appears to be correlation between mold sensitivity and asthma, chronic respiratory and sinus illness, ME/CFS (myalgic encephalomyelitis, also known as chronic fatigue syndrome), chemical sensitivities, and fibromyalgia. Some doctors don't want to think about all this, but the chronically ill can't afford to be closed-minded. Our lives are on the line.

Allergy clinics can provide tests for determining whether you've developed mold allergy. Typically, a serum is applied to the patient's skin and monitored for histamine response. A positive allergy test might suggest a past or current mold exposure.

Some patients fly across the country to the few clinics that specialize in mold illness, ME/CFS, or environmental medicine. In Oregon, many patients have found relief, if not a full cure, through alternative, complementary medicine. In this state we're lucky to have a strong network of naturopathic doctors (NDs), functional and integrative medicine clinics, along with a few Environmental Medicine

MDs. This population tends to be more educated in mold awareness. They may recommend additional testing, including genetic tests to look for variants that can affect a patient's ability to process molds, such as HLA-DR.

Learn More About Mold & Chronic Illness

Get your hands on Julie Rehmeyer's memoir, "Through the Shadowlands: A Science Writer's Odyssey into an Illness Science Doesn't Understand" (Rodale, 2017). Rehmeyer's thoughtfully written tale of illness, discovery, and recovery weaves memories of childhood amid the author's startling fall into incapacitating weakness and paralysis.

It's a personal story, infused with Rehmeyer's love of the natural world, her dog, and [SPOILER ALERT] the man she winds up marrying. But Rehmeyer is a science writer by trade, a contributing editor to *Discover* magazine who's also written for *Science News*, *Wired*, the *New York Times*, *High Country News*, and *O*, the Oprah magazine. "Through the Shadowlands" showcases her firm grasp on the current, tumultuous science and politics surrounding mold illness and ME/CFS.

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