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Got mildew?

Professionally trained dog detects toxic mold in homes, businesses

by ASHLEY MILLER
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Mold isn't just an inconvenience; it's a health hazard.

Commonly referred to as mildew, mold is a type of fungus that thrives on moisture and grows anywhere it's damp or where there's decaying matter. By itself, mold isn't toxic, but it can become poisonous when it develops toxins.

Toxic mold is an increasing problem in the Pacific Northwest that home and business owners should be aware of, according to Paul Collins, Port Angeles resident and owner of Enviro-Clean Northwest.

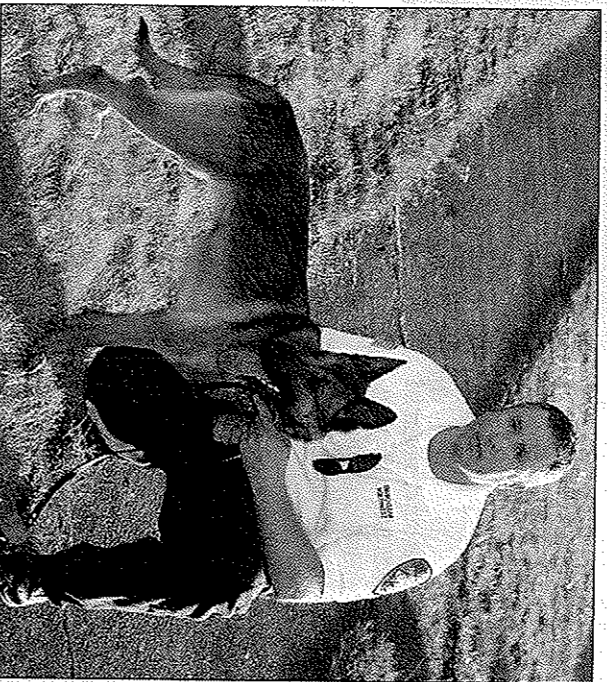
"It's becoming more and more of a problem and causes a handful of respiratory problems," Collins said about toxic mold. "If you look around, you will see that we have a lot of mold on the peninsula, but it's the stuff inside that you need to worry about."

Left undetected, long-term exposure to toxic mold can cause nausea, headaches, respiratory problems and eye irritation. An otherwise perfectly healthy person may experience a skin rash, runny nose, cough, congestion and general aggravation. A person with allergies or asthma may suffer more extreme symptoms. Persons with immune deficiency or lung disease are at an increased risk for infection from toxic mold.

With the help of his canine companion Zena, Collins inspects commercial and residential buildings for toxic mold. "The dog's nose can detect scents 10,000 times better than a human's," Collins explained, "therefore enabling us to find toxic molds in an unobtrusive manner."

The problem with toxic mold, Collins continued, is that it typically grows in places people can't see — in the walls, under carpet and in places where water damage has occurred.

Signs of toxic mold include blue, black or green stains on ceilings and walls, a musty odor or lingering and unexplained urine scent, recurrent allergies that don't respond to treatment, and



Paul Collins, of Port Angeles, and Zena, a 3-year-old Belgian Malinois, are certified through the World Detector Dog Organization to find toxic mold in commercial and residential buildings.

Photo by Ashley Miller

brown, orange or green specks around tiles and plumbing fixtures.

Traditional means of locating toxic mold include cutting or probing walls to determine if fungus is present, which can be costly and time consuming, Collins said. "With Zena's nose, I can pinpoint exactly where mold is growing, which means lower remediation costs on the buildings being inspected."

Collins and Zena, a 3-year-old Belgian Malinois, received instruction at the Vom Kaiserhof Training Center in Lawrence, Kan. Collins speaks to Zena in German. The pair is certified through the World Detector Dog Organization.

Zena is one of only 20 highly trained dogs nationwide helping people detect mold and one of only a handful of canines doing so in the Pacific Northwest.

The WDDO has strict guidelines for dogs and trainers, including testing in both odor recognition and search techniques. During training, Zena successfully detected 17 types of toxic mold and passed every test. She also is certified for narcotics detection.

If Zena discovers mold growing in a home or business — which she communicates to Collins by sniffing, sitting and barking near severely affected sites — a sample is taken and sent to a laboratory in Bothell. The sample is identified and analyzed for toxicity at which point Collins discusses the findings with the client.

Collins cautions clients against using home remedies to get rid of toxic mold and advises

them to contact a professional. Ridding a residence of toxic mold isn't as easy as one might think, he warned. For example, bleach isn't always the answer when dealing with toxic mold and actually can contribute to the problem in some cases.

A Port Angeles resident, who asked to remain unidentified for the sake of her landlord, is dealing with allergies and illness associated with toxic mold. The woman has suffered multiple allergic reactions — including swollen extremities, rashes and chest pain — within the past three months. After emergency room and doctor's visits, the woman was told by an area specialist that she suffers from a mold allergy. Now, she is trying to pinpoint where she's being exposed to mold and she called Collins to inspect her home.

Collins started Enviro-Clean Northwest one year ago after an on-the-job back injury forced him to change professions, switching from a marketing and sales position to a more uncommon profession: mold detection.

Service fees are determined by the size and number of rooms inspected. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call Collins at 670-4595 or 565-2670.

Handling toxic mold, according to Clean Water Partners environmental law experts:

Even though all household molds may not be toxic, it is important to remember that all types of mold can be harmful to health. Regular mold can cause allergies to certain people who are prone to such reactions, but toxic mold can be harmful to everyone. Thus it is important to control the growth of mold and rid your home or workplace from all types of mold, including toxic mold. Here are some tips to help you deal with any mold present in your home.

- **Locate the mold:** If you see any signs of mold in your home, toxic mold or otherwise, it is necessary to locate all the areas where any type of mold may be present. Places where mold is most likely to grow are wet basements, attics where there is a problem of a leaky roof, ceilings and walls due to leaky pipes, moist carpeting, behind and on wallpaper, and all kinds of wood products.

- **Contain the mold:** Once you have located the areas where mold grows, you need to contain the growth of toxic mold and stop it from spreading to unaffected areas. Mold needs moisture to grow, so you should try and stop its supply of moisture. Fix all leaky pipes and taps and ensure that there is no seepage of water behind your walls or in bathrooms.

- **Kill and remove the mold:** Toxic mold is a living organism and has to be killed in order to disappear. Spraying and fogging with mold destroying sprays is a good way to kill mold. Once the mold is destroyed, you have to remove the dead mold as even that can cause health problems. The area from where the mold is removed should be thoroughly dried and all supplies used to clean the toxic mold should be discarded.

For more information about identifying and managing toxic mold, go online to www.cleanwaterpartners.org.



United Way of Clallam County