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When Mold Takes Hold

by Arnold Mann

In 1993, Lauren Martin was doing well, with a terrific, rent-stabilized apartment on Manhattan's fashionable Upper West Side, a boyfriend, a dog and her own psychotherapy practice. But things changed. Nine years later, she found herself sick, alone and virtually homeless, a victim of toxic mold. The problems started shortly after she moved into the 20-unit, turn-of-the-20th-century building. First came the migraine headaches, then the sinus and respiratory problems, nausea, constipation and severe joint pain. Doctors didn't know what was going on. By the time Martin fled the leak-plagued building last summer; she had been diagnosed with mold-related immunologic problems, impaired thyroid and adrenal function, chronic fatigue and memory impairment.

"I'm feeling like a refugee," Martin said in her downtown office, where she slept three nights a week for eight months until she found an affordable, mold-free apartment. The other four nights, she spent with friends.

"The biggest tragedy for me is to be this bright, competent professional just trying to establish my practice, to be sick and feel stuck."

Since 1999, when USA WEEKEND Magazine first published the story of a mold-stricken family in Dripping Springs, Texas, reports of mold-related illnesses and insurance claims have skyrocketed from California and Texas to Louisiana

and New York. Families have abandoned mold-plagued houses. Affected schools have closed and relocated children. Insurance companies hit with mounting claims for moldy homes have raised premiums and, in some regions, stopped selling homeowner policies altogether.

It seemed only a matter of time



Physician Michael Gray with patient Kari Kilian, who was exposed to high mold levels in her Scottsdale, Ariz., apartment

before yet another mold front surfaced: the nation's apartment buildings. What is surprising, however; is the apparent scope of the problem—and the uniquely intractable challenges faced by those who live in contaminated buildings. Tenants often find themselves pitted against landlords who are unable or unwilling to take on the trouble and expense of mold removal.

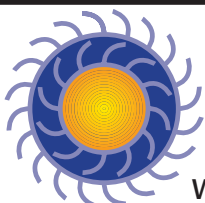
Toxic mold has been found in buildings old and new, from Sacramento to New York. No one knows exactly how

many, but experts say the problem is nationwide, affecting everything from the most exclusive new apartments and condominiums in Washington, D.C., to old, neglected tenements in Harlem. An article posted on the Web site of the National Multi Housing Council, an association of real estate owners and developers, some of whom face millions in remediation costs and lawsuits, calls mold "the next environmental quagmire facing commercial property owners."

Among the affected: the upscale new Residences at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Washington, where basketball star Michael Jordan owns an apartment and where, it's been reported, men in moon suits soon will tear out walls in one-third of the 162 units to clean up dangerous mold caused by leaky plumbing; and downtown Manhattan's Henry Phipps Plaza South, whose owners were sued by hundreds of tenants reporting a variety of illnesses

(among them was a family that blames mold for the death of a 7-year-old daughter).

A common part of nature, molds become a problem when they start growing indoors because of water leaks or condensation. Occasional growth of common molds, like Cladosporium and Alternaria, rarely poses a significant health threat. But when a leak goes untended and timbers or wallboards become saturated, it doesn't take long—a few weeks, perhaps—for mold to grow and fill the air with spores.



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Molds have been linked to several illnesses. They are primary suspects in the tripling asthma rate over the past 20 years. In 1994, researchers at Harvard University's School of Public Health studied 10,000 homes across the United States and Canada. Half had "water damage, mold and mildew associated with a 50% to 100% increase in respiratory symptoms," Harvard researcher John Spengler told USA WEEKEND. Recent studies suggest the same problems exist in apartment buildings. A 1999 Mayo Clinic study pegged nearly all of the chronic sinus infections afflicting 37 million Americans to molds.

When toxic molds such as *Stachybotrys*, *Aspergillus versicolor* and some species of *Penicillium* are involved, it's another matter entirely. These molds—which grow in damp, dark places and often are hidden behind walls, under floors and above ceilings—produce dangerous airborne "mycotoxins." Many doctors believe they cause a raft of serious ills, including flulike symptoms, chronic fatigue, memory impairment, dizziness, and bleeding in the nose and lungs, while others say the science isn't there yet to make that claim.

In Benson, Ariz., Michael Gray is a lone voice against state health officials. "We are just seeing the tip of the iceberg," says Gray, a doctor who is medical director of the Progressive Healthcare Group and a former state medical directions commissioner. According to Gray, mold attacks several main body systems, acting like a double-edged sword to the immune system, which becomes excessively activated in response to invading spores, while mycotoxins cause immune suppression, making the body vulnerable to infec-

tion. Mold spores lodge deep in the lungs, resulting in airway obstruction and infection, Gray says, while mycotoxins attack the brain, causing memory loss, seizures, movement disorders and other cognitive deficits.

It seemed only a matter of time before toxic mold erupted on yet a new front: the nation's apartments.

One of Gray's patients is 28-year-old Kari Kilian, who says she was exposed to high levels of toxic mold in her Scottsdale apartment for five months between 1999 and 2000. She says the smell at the GlenEagles Apartments was there from the day she moved in to the day she moved out. The building has since undergone extensive mold repairs and has been sold, says current building representative Melanie Graham, who adds, "There is currently no mold problem at GlenEagles, to the best of my knowledge."

Today, Kilian, a former Miss Wisconsin American Coed, has been diagnosed with mold-related "mycotoxicosis" and lives in a motel on disability. She takes medication to suppress recurring seizures and suffers from a movement disorder.

"I have episodes where my face starts twitching, and I have uncontrolled upper-body movements," she says. "I always had a very active lifestyle. This is not the place I had ever envisioned my life as being."

In New York City's Spanish Harlem, a group of nuns has taken on the mold fight. The Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Service works with landlords—or, if necessary, testifies against them in court—to clean up moldy tenements where the asthma rate is double

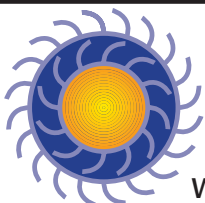
the norm, according to epidemiologic reports provided by one of the nuns, Susanne Lachapelle.

More affluent tenants are hiring lawyers who specialize in mold-related suits. Thirteen families in the prestigious,

838 unit Pavilion apartments on Manhattan's Upper East Side are suing Glenwood Management Co., claiming health-related illnesses. At Henry Phipps Plaza South, a toxic mold lawsuit lodged by 400 residents was settled for a reported \$1.2 million, and the landlord has agreed to spend \$25 million more to rid the building of mold. Lauren Martin, the therapist who slept in her office, is suing her former landlord, Pablo Llorente, who is under a court order to clean up the toxic molds in his two buildings on West 80th Street.

Across the country, at the Fairway Apartments in Citrus Heights, California, outside Sacramento, legal battles over mold have been raging for years. Among those suing former California health insurance executive Sylvia Lobland, who blames her health problems on mold at the upscale golf community, where she lived for a year: Lobland, who now lives elsewhere and is on disability, recalls waking up in the night feeling "like somebody was sitting on my chest." Often she would sleep for days, she says.

Newer buildings, whose elaborate heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems are prone to leaks, are not immune. "Some of the most famous buildings in New York have serious mold problems," says Bill Sothern, an industrial



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hygienist at Microecologies, an environmental investigation and cleanup company. Sothorn has worked on more than 1,000 high-rise apartments. In half, he says, the health complaints have been due to mold. "Any building that has sustained water problems that haven't been promptly addressed will have serious mold problems."

Why don't people just move out? Some who can afford to, do. A 10-year resident of Martin's former building, anesthesiologist Steven Stein, and his wife, Laura, a nurse, left last September, when high levels of *Stachybotrys* were discovered behind the walls in the bedroom and bathroom, industrial hygiene reports show. Their rent went from \$1,800 to \$4,000, but for them it was a no-brainer: At the time, Laura was eight months pregnant. "We knew about pulmonary hemorrhaging in infants with this mold, and there was no way we could live in that apartment with our new baby," says Steven Stein, 36, who developed a thyroid disorder usually found in genetically predisposed women while he was living in the building. He has no history of the disease in his family.

Deborah and Brian Chenensky know they should leave their \$1,600 a-month, two-bedroom Pavilion apartment in New York, where they have lived for 16 years. But anything comparable in the neighborhood would cost \$6,000. "Their whole life is built around this neighborhood," says their attorney, Steven Goldman. "Their friends are here, their son's school—it's all here." In a written statement, Charles Dorego, vice president and general counsel for the Pavilion's landlord, Glenwood Management, said that the mold has all been removed and that the building "has,

and always will, respond immediately to remedy problems of this kind."

Still, says Deborah Chenensky, "I'm scared." She suffers from chronic headaches and sinusitis, diminished lung capacity, fatigue and memory problems. Her husband, Brian, has similar symptoms and was recently diagnosed with asthma at 45. Son Dean, 7, also has been diagnosed with diminished lung capacity and allergic rhinitis from mold exposure. Deborah would like to move to Florida "I know we should leave," she says, her voice raspy and breaking. "I say to Brian, 'Please, let's go tomorrow. It's in my chest. I can feel it, burning. We should just get out.'"



Across the country in their New York apartment, Brian and Deborah Chenensky and their son, Dean, also suffer with symptoms associated with mold

Arnold Mann has written extensively for USA Weekend Magazine about mold.

The Story That Keeps Spreading



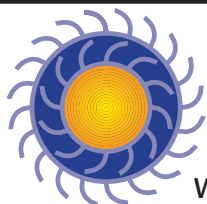
USA Weekend's Dec. 3-5, 1999 issue published a cover story about the plight of Melinda Ballard and her family in Dripping Springs, Texas, and exposed the dangers of toxic mold to a national audience.

Since then, the Ballard family has won a landmark \$32 million judgment against Farmers Insurance Group for failing to address their home's mold problem. The verdict has created a ripple effect throughout the insurance industry, making insurers more accountable for how they respond to toxic mold claims.

Our subsequent cover story about the mold activist students at Eastside High School in Greenville, S.C., also hit a national nerve. Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman has since declared school air quality one of her priorities.

And recently, in response to a reporter's inquiries for today's story on apartment mold, New York's state Assemblymember Scott Stringer said he is planning to draft legislation to require anyone leasing or selling a residence in New York to disclose any mold history. A similar bill is now making its way through Congress.

Even Erin Brockovich, the legal activist portrayed by Julia Roberts in the movie of the same name, has taken on the mold fight. Brockovich nearly lost her dream house in Agoura Hills, Calif., to mold before spending \$800,000 to save it, and lobbied for the state's new mold protection law. "This was my home, and I wasn't going to get run out of it," she says, adding that "by working with the insurance companies and legislators" the growing battle against mold can be won.



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