

A Guide for Employees and Employers

Navigating Mold & Microbial Contamination In The Workplace

Tips & Strategies



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MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

How to Use This Guide



Dear Reader,

Over the course of your adult life, you'll spend approximately 90,000 hours at work,¹ and your children may spend more than 15,600 hours in school.² Yet many of these buildings fail to meet basic health standards, putting occupants at risk. Where we work and learn directly impacts our health, performance, and long-term well-being.

According to the EPA's Building Assessment Survey and Evaluation (BASE) study, 85% of randomly selected U.S. office buildings had past water damage, and 45% had active leaks.³ These conditions foster mold and microbial growth, which are environmental hazards increasingly linked to chronic illness and disability.

Many individuals with environmentally acquired illnesses struggle to participate fully in work or school due to poor indoor air quality. While the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) protects individuals with disabling, environmentally triggered conditions, awareness remains low among both employees and employers.

This guide aims to help bridge that gap. Inside, you'll find:

- Common health effects associated with mold exposure
- Prevention and intervention steps for mold and water damage
- OSHA's role in addressing indoor air quality concerns
- Guidance on ADA accommodations and your legal rights
- Template letters for employees, physicians, and employers

By equipping both employees and employers with knowledge, we can create safer, healthier environments for everyone.

Together, we can change the air.

Change the Air Foundation



It Starts With Water Damage— But It Doesn't End There

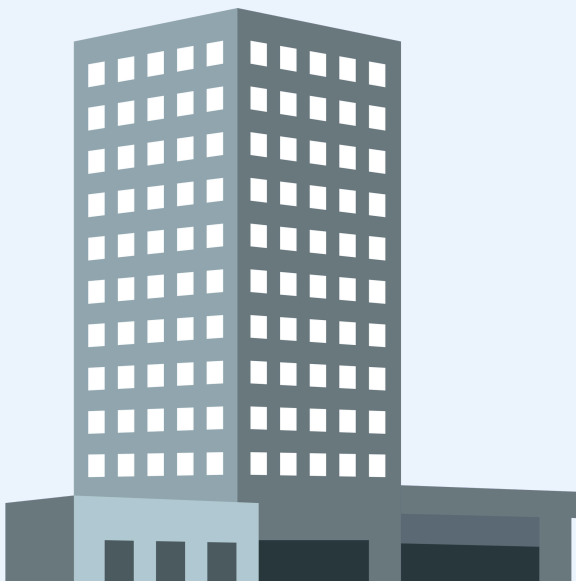
Moisture in a building can come from many sources, including **plumbing failures, roof or window leaks, poor drainage or landscaping, appliance malfunctions, cleaning practices, high humidity**, and everyday **human activities** like cooking, bathing, or even breathing. **Weather events** such as rain, snow, or flooding can also contribute. When conditions are right, mold can begin to grow in as little as 24–48 hours.⁴

Water-damaged buildings can also host **mold, bacteria, mycotoxins, microbial volatile organic compounds (mVOCs), endotoxins, and other pollutants**.⁵ Together, these contaminants create a complex ecosystem that can negatively impact human health.⁶ Fortunately, the same prevention and remediation practices that work for mold and water damage work for these other pollutants.

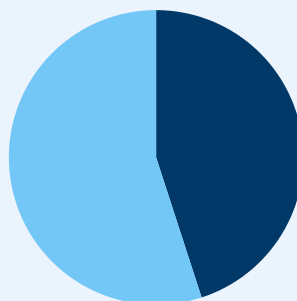
To learn more about this complex ecosystem, check out Dr. Jack Thrasher and Sandra Crawley's paper [here](#), and Dr. Janette Hope's paper [here](#).

EPA's BASE Study

Building Assessment Survey and Evaluation Study

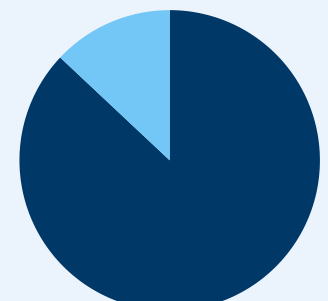


45%



Have Current Leaks

85%



Had Past Leaks

*Randomly selected buildings in the US. See full report [here](#).

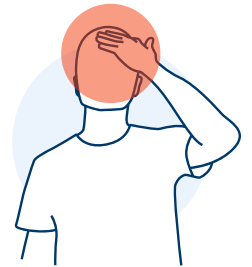


Cognitive & Neurological



- Fatigue^{7,13}
- Headaches⁸
- Memory loss⁸
- Brain fog⁸
- Dizziness⁸
- Blurred vision⁸

- Depression^{8,9}
- Anxiety^{8,9}
- Focus & concentration¹²
- Numbness¹²
- Tingling¹²
- Metallic taste¹²

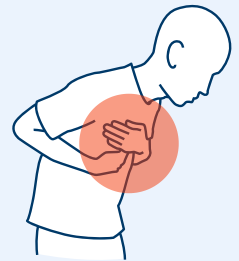


Eyes, Ears, & Nose



- Nasal & sinus congestion^{7,8,10}
- Ringing ears⁸
- Blurred vision⁸
- Dry & irritated eyes^{7,8,10}
- Allergic rhinitis¹¹

Respiratory



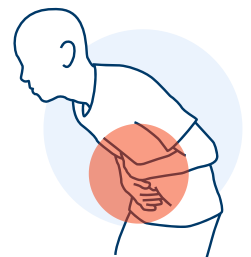
- Wheezing⁷
- Cough^{7,8,10}
- Asthma^{8,11}
- Shortness of breath⁷
- Sore & scratchy throat^{8,10}
- Bronchitis & respiratory tract infections¹⁶

Other



- Skin rashes^{7,8}
- Muscle aches⁷
- Cancer⁸
- Hormone changes¹⁴

- Weight loss⁷
- Inflammatory GI diseases¹⁵



Note: This is not a complete list of symptoms and health effects. Health effects differ from person to person.

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

General Reminders



#1: Mold and moisture are often concealed.

Mold and moisture is often hidden behind walls, under flooring (tile, carpet, etc.), behind furniture, beneath wall coverings (wallpaper, wall art, etc.), inside HVAC systems and ductwork, or in other hard-to-reach places.¹⁷



#3: Remediation means safe and effective removal.

Microbial growth should not be sprayed, painted, or covered up; it should be removed safely and effectively.

Remediation should follow accredited industry standards such as the ANSI/IICRC S520.¹⁹



#5: Regardless of color, all mold must be removed.

Color is not a reliable way to identify mold species, nor is it a way to determine the health risk or toxicity of mold growth. All mold, regardless of color, should be safely removed.²¹



#2: A musty odor is a sign of a current problem.

Mold that is actively growing produces microbial volatile organic compounds (mVOCs). These gases can create a “musty” odor and are a sign of active mold growth and moisture. Dry or dormant mold may not produce an odor.¹⁸



#4: Dead or dormant mold is still a health hazard.

Mold growth—whether active or dormant, visible or hidden—poses a health risk and should be safely removed. According to the EPA, “dead” mold may still be a health hazard and should be safely removed.²⁰



#6: Moisture sources must be addressed quickly.

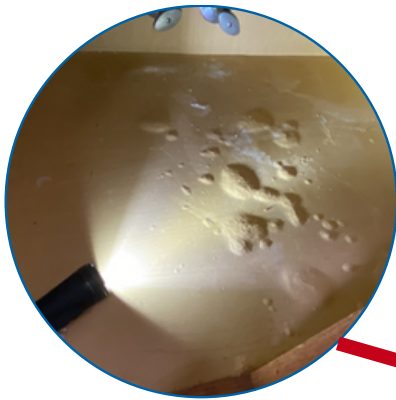
Microbial growth can begin in as little as 24–48 hours. Leaks, high humidity, condensation, etc., can all contribute to microbial growth.⁴

Spraying mold or painting over it does not prevent harm.

Temporary fixes like bleach or paint won't solve the problem—they just hide it. Many products may remove the visible growth or bleach the color from the surface, but are unable to penetrate into the building material where mycelia (mold “roots”) have grown. When favorable conditions return, mold can begin to regrow.²²

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

5 Signs of Water Damage



#1
Bubbling



#5
Staining &
Discoloration



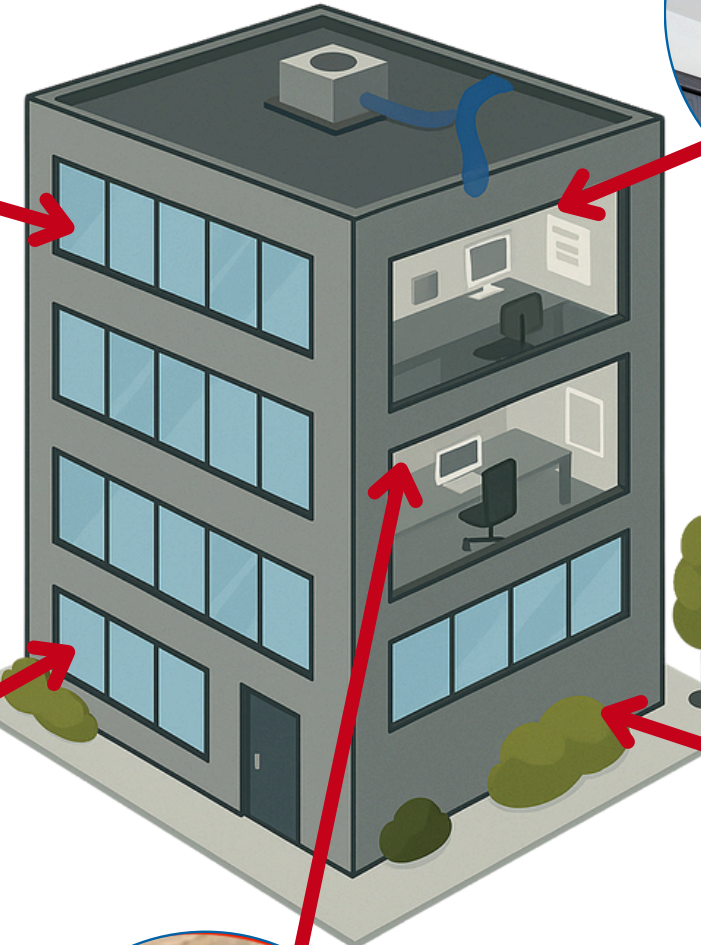
#2
Buckling &
Separating



#3
Peeling &
Cracking



#4
Rust &
Efflorescence



Act Fast: Hidden moisture can lead to microbial growth within 24–48 hours.⁴
If you notice these signs—or detect a musty smell—report it immediately.

Learn the Risks



1

Building materials or furnishings are visibly damaged.

ALERTS: Look for stains, discoloration, warping, or peeling paint on walls, ceilings, floors, or furniture.

2

Building materials have been wet for more than 24 hours.

ALERTS: Mold can begin growing within 24–48 hours of water exposure.⁴ Check for areas that have been wet for extended periods.

3

There are existing moisture problems in the building.

ALERTS: This includes leaks, condensation, high humidity, or standing water in basements, crawl spaces, or other areas.

4

Occupants have reported musty or moldy odors.

ALERTS: A musty smell is often a sign of active mold growth, even if it's not visible.

5

Occupants have reported health problems.

ALERTS: Symptoms like coughing, sneezing, headaches, or skin irritation could indicate mold exposure.

6

The building has been recently remodeled or changed.

ALERTS: Construction or changes in building use can disturb mold or create moisture problems if not properly managed.

7

Routine maintenance has been delayed or altered.

ALERTS: Delayed maintenance can lead to unresolved water leaks, HVAC issues, or other conditions that promote mold growth.

Note: If the answer is “yes” to any of these questions, consider hiring an appropriate professional such as an Indoor Environmental Professional (IEP), Industrial Hygienist (IH), or Building Biologist to investigate further.

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

Monitor and Remediate



Inspect Regularly

Conduct quarterly inspections of all building areas, including:

- **Interior:** Ceilings, walls, flooring, plumbing, HVAC systems
- **Exterior:** Roofs, windows, drainage, foundations, gutters
- **Unconditioned spaces:** Attics, basements, crawlspaces



Document and Track

Create a centralized log or database and document:

- **Visible moisture,** dripping, or pooling water
- **Signs of damage:** staining, buckling, bubbling paint, rust
- **Microbial growth** or musty odors



Address Mold and Moisture Properly

Use safe, effective remediation practices that meet or exceed:

- **ANSI/IICRC S500:** Standard for Professional Water Damage Restoration
- **ANSI/IICRC S520:** Standard for Professional Mold Remediation



Fix The Source and Prevent Recurrence

Identify and resolve the root cause of moisture:

- Leaky pipes, roofs, or windows
- HVAC malfunctions
- Poor drainage or high humidity



Verify Successful Removal

After cleanup, perform Post-Remediation Verification (PRV):

- Comprehensive visual inspection
- Moisture readings
- Strategic sampling or testing

Mold prevention isn't a one-time fix—it's an ongoing responsibility. It's important to build a proactive maintenance plan that protects health, productivity, and a building's integrity.

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

NIOSH Assessment Tool



The **NIOSH Dampness and Mold Assessment Tool** is a practical, science-based checklist created by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).²³ It helps identify and document visible signs of dampness, mold, and related damage in buildings—especially workplaces and schools.

This tool is designed for use by professionals such as building managers, occupational health and safety officers, industrial hygienists, and anyone overseeing indoor environments. It includes checklists for both general building areas and HVAC systems, making it easier to evaluate conditions that may pose health risks.



Dampness and Mold Assessment Tool

General Buildings Form

Use one form per area being assessed.

General Information

Date:
Observer:
Building:
Floor:
Room/Area Identification:

Room/Area Type: Describe below the type of room/area you are assessing.

Mold Odor: Fill in the bubble for mold odor. Be sure to smell for mold odor when you first walk into the room/area.

①None ①Mild ②Moderate ③Strong Describe source of mold odor: _____ ○Source Unknown

See scoring below for ①②③.	Check if nothing found	Damage or Stains	Check if near exterior wall*	Visible Mold	Check if near exterior wall*	Wet or Damp	Check if near exterior wall*	Component Notes	Assessment Notes
✓	✓	See scoring below	✓	See scoring below	✓	See scoring below	✓	Fill in the bubbles for the type of material that is affected.	Fill in the bubbles for additional detail. Describe if "Other"
✓		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Ceiling tile ○Plaster ○Concrete ○Sheet rock ○Metal ○Wood	○Peeling paint ○Rust Other:
✓		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Sheet rock ○Plaster ○Concrete ○Block ○Brick ○Tile ○Wood	○Peeling paint ○Efflorescence Other:
✓		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Wood ○Carpet ○Vinyl ○Ceramic ○Concrete	○Buckling Other:
		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Exterior ○Interior ○Skylight	○Peeling paint ○Condensation Other:
		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Furniture ○Mechanical ○Sink ○Toilet ○Copier	○Peeling paint ○Rust Other:
		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Radiator ○Forced-air ○Fan ○Unit ventilator ○Window unit	○Peeling paint ○Rust Other:
		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Books ○Boxes ○Equipment	○Wrinkled pages ○Crumpled boxes Other:
		①②③		①②③		①②③		○Plumbing ○Gas	○Peeling paint ○Rust Other:

General Notes

* Within 3 feet of exterior wall.

Scoring: ① = none ① < or = the size of a sheet of paper ② > than a sheet of paper to the size of a standard door ③ > than the size of a standard door



Key Challenges With Current Laws

Lack of enforceable federal standards makes it hard for workers to get protection or action—even when health is clearly affected. Challenges include:

- **No Federal Indoor Air Quality Standards for Mold Exist**
 - Neither OSHA nor the EPA has enforceable indoor air quality standards for workplaces at this time.
- **OSHA Enforcement is Rare Unless the Mold is Visible and Widespread**
 - OSHA doesn't have specific standards for mold, but the General Duty Clause states: *"Each employer shall furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees."*²⁴
- **NIOSH's Health Hazard Evaluation (HHE) Program Usually Will Not Conduct an On-Site Investigation for Mold/Indoor Air Quality Requests**
 - If a request for a HHE is not initiated by the employer, the cooperation of the union or a minimum of three employees is usually required.²⁵

Worker Protections Under ADA



The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** is a federal law designed to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in the workplace. It applies to businesses with 15 or more employees and outlines a broad, though not exhaustive, range of qualifying disabilities.

While conditions like **Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS)** or **mold-related illness** are not named specifically, many affected individuals may still meet the definition of disability, as these conditions often interfere significantly with major life functions—both physical and cognitive.



Tips for Requesting Accommodations

The **ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA)** was enacted to make it easier for individuals to be recognized as having a disability. The goal was to lessen the burden on the employee and instead place more responsibility on the employer to engage in a collaborative process to determine whether reasonable accommodations can be made.

Reasonable accommodations are changes to the work environment or job duties that help an employee with a disability perform their essential functions. Here are a few general tips for engaging in the interactive process:



Get Medical Documentation

Clear documentation is crucial. Seek supporting documentation from a knowledgeable healthcare provider familiar with mold-related illnesses.



Use ADA Language

Use ADA-specific language. Use phrases like: "I am requesting a reasonable accommodation for a disability under the ADA."



Know Your Rights

Consult an employment attorney if your employer does not participate in the interactive process or denies accommodations.



Prioritize Your Health

Always prioritize your health. Recovery can be difficult if you remain in a mold-contaminated building.



Environmental Modifications

- Relocating the employee to a different workspace away from known water damage or mold issues until remediation is complete.
- Providing a private office with dedicated ventilation or air filtration.
- Installing HEPA (minimum) air purifiers.



Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Allowing the use of respirators or masks if needed.
- Providing protective clothing or equipment if the employee must occasionally enter areas with potential mold exposure.



Work Arrangement Flexibility

- Offering remote work options when feasible.
- Implementing flexible scheduling to avoid overexertion.
- Providing alternative meeting spaces if the employee's regular workspace or meeting rooms trigger symptoms.



You Have the Right To:

- Confidentiality
- Engage in an interactive process
- Effective, reasonable accommodation
- Be free from retaliation



Employees affected by mold in the workplace can have their healthcare practitioner use the following sample letter template on page 16 to support their request for reasonable accommodations for their medical needs.

Primary Purpose	Physician supporting their patients' requests for workplace accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
Who Sends It	Healthcare provider to employer.
When to Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When an employee is diagnosed with a mold-related condition. • When an employee needs professional documentation for an ADA request.
Recommended Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient's medical history and current condition. • Specific condition(s), e.g., mold sensitivity, allergic rhinitis, asthma exacerbated by mold exposure. • Medical assessment and professional opinion.
Expected Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation supporting the employee's accommodation request. • Medical certification that accommodations are medically necessary.
Timing	Send promptly after the employee requests support.
Follow-up Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available for clarification questions. • May need to provide additional documentation.
Key Language	"Medically necessary accommodations."

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

Sample Physician Letter



To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to support my patient's request for workplace accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). I have been treating [Patient Name] since [date] and am familiar with their medical history and current condition.

[Patient Name] has been diagnosed with [specific condition(s), e.g., mold sensitivity, allergic rhinitis, asthma exacerbated by mold exposure, etc.]. This condition substantially limits one or more major life activities, including [specify relevant activities, e.g., breathing, working in certain environments].

Based on my medical assessment, I recommend the following accommodation(s):

- [List specific accommodation(s)]
- [Any relevant limitations or restrictions]
- [List alternatives if primary recommendations are not feasible]
- [Specify conditions under which alternatives would be acceptable]

Additional Considerations:

- [Any additional environmental triggers to avoid, e.g., perfume, secondhand smoke, cleaning products, pet dander]
- [Any monitoring requirements and emergency response considerations]

Please note that this patient's condition requires prompt attention to these accommodation needs. If you require any additional medical information or clarification, please contact my office directly.

Professional Opinion: I hereby certify that these accommodations are medically necessary for the patient's health and ability to perform their job functions.

Sincerely,

Physician's Signature

[Physician's Name, Credentials]

[Medical License Number]

[Contact Information]



Employees affected by mold in the workplace can use the following sample letter template on page 18 to notify their employer of their intent to seek reasonable accommodations for their medical needs.

Primary Purpose	Requesting a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) due to a medical sensitivity to mold.
Who Sends It	Employee to their supervisor/HR.
When to Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When mold affects an employee’s ability to work in certain areas of the building, perform specific job functions, etc. • When an employee has medical documentation from a healthcare provider. • When ready to begin the “interactive process”.
Recommended Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical documentation from a healthcare provider (as stated in template). • Specific accommodation needs. • Description of how the condition affects work.
Expected Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative accommodations that would be equally effective. • Ongoing dialogue to find an appropriate solution.
Timing	Send after getting medical documentation, but before symptoms worsen.
Follow-up Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in the interactive process. • Monitor accommodation effectiveness. • Consult an attorney if needed.
Key Language	“Reasonable accommodation under the ADA.”

MOLD IN THE WORKPLACE

Sample ADA Request



[Date]
[Supervisor's Name]
[Company Name]
[Address]

Dear [Supervisor's Name],

I am writing to formally request a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) due to my medical sensitivity to mold. This condition affects my ability to [describe how mold impacts your work, for example: work in certain areas of the building, perform specific job functions, etc.].

My healthcare provider has documented my condition and recommended the following accommodation(s):

- [Relocation to a different work area]
- [Remote work arrangements]
- [Installation of air purification systems]

I have attached the following documentation to support my request:

- Medical documentation from [Healthcare Provider's Name]
- [Any other relevant documentation]

I understand this begins an interactive process, and I am happy to discuss alternative accommodations that would be equally effective in allowing me to perform my essential job functions while addressing my medical needs. Please let me know what additional information you need to evaluate this request. I look forward to working together to find an appropriate solution.

Sincerely,

Employee's Signature
[Employee Name]
[Contact Information]



Employees affected by mold in the workplace can use the following sample letter template on page 20 to notify the building owner of mold, water damage, and other indoor air quality issues.

Primary Purpose	Informing the landlord about the concerning signs of water damage and mold.
Who Sends It	Employee/tenant to building owner/management.
When to Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When an employee has observed concerning conditions, including visible water damage, suspected mold growth, or musty odors. • When conditions can contribute to poor indoor air quality and potential health risks.
Recommended Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation of concerning conditions observed. • Evidence that conditions can contribute to poor indoor air quality and potential health risks.
Expected Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thorough inspection by a properly trained and certified indoor air quality professional. • Remediation conducted in accordance with accredited industry standards such as the ANSI/IICRC S520.
Timing	Send as soon as the concerning conditions are observed.
Follow-up Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request inspection timeline. • Follow up if no response. • Document all communications.
Key Language	"Accredited industry standards such as ANSI/IICRC S520" and "health risks."



Dear [Building Owner's Name/Management Company],

My name is [Name] and I work at [Business] located at your property at [Building Address]. I would like to bring to your attention concerning signs of water damage and mold which can negatively affect human health, damage building materials, and create safety hazards for those who work in or visit the building.

As an occupant of this building, I have observed concerning conditions:

- [Visible water damage (e.g., leaks, bulk water, condensation, stained ceilings/walls, warped flooring, etc.)]
- [Suspected or visible mold growth]
- [Persistent musty or unpleasant odors]
- [Excessive indoor humidity or condensation]

The presence of these conditions can contribute to poor indoor air quality and potential health risks for occupants, including respiratory issues, allergies, cognitive issues, and other adverse effects. It is crucial that these concerns be addressed promptly and safely using appropriate remediation practices to ensure the well-being of everyone in the building.

I kindly request that a thorough inspection be completed by a properly trained and certified indoor air quality professional and any necessary remediation be conducted in accordance with accredited industry standards such as the ANSI/IICRC S520 (2024). This is essential for maintaining a safe and habitable environment.

Please provide a response at your earliest convenience regarding the steps you intend to take to assess and address these issues. If you require additional details or would like to discuss this matter further, I am available at [Your Contact Information].

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter. I appreciate your commitment to maintaining a safe and healthy building for all occupants.

Sincerely,

Tenant Signature

[Tenant Name and Contact Information]

Change the Air Foundation Resources

Mold & Water Damage? Start Here

- [Start Here](#)

Free Downloads

- [5 Signs of Water Damage](#)
- [Moisture Basics](#)
- [Questions to Ask When Hiring an Indoor Environmental Professional](#)
- [Questions to Ask When Hiring a Mold Remediator](#)
- [Mold Remediation at a Glance](#)

Related Articles

- [ADA 101 for CIRS & Mold Illness](#)

Related Interviews

- [Lou Gehrig's Disease \(ALS\) or Mold Illness? How One Attorney Found the Truth](#)
- [Sick At School: How Toxic Mold Impacts Student Health](#)
- [Sick At School: A Teacher's Battle Against Mold](#)
- [Mold In the Workplace: Vanessa's Story](#)
- [AJ's Story: From Seizures to a Second Chance](#)

Stay Informed

- [Newsletter](#)

Government Resources

ADA National Network

- [Ask ADA Questions](#)

American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA)

- [AIHA Mold Fact Sheet](#)

California Department of Public Health

- [Statement on Building Dampness, Mold, and Health](#)

Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC)

- [IICRC S520 Mold Remediation Standard](#)

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

- [Mold](#)

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

- [ADA Fact Sheet](#)

US Department of Justice: Civil Rights Division

- [ADA Infoline](#)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- [Mold in Schools and Commercial Buildings](#)

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [WHO Guidelines for Indoor Air Quality: Dampness & Mould](#)

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“The connection between the health and the dwelling of the population is one of the most important that exists.”

**Florence Nightingale
Founder of Modern Nursing**