

How to Handle Mold in an Apartment Building: A Tenant's Guide

Understanding the Problem

Living with mold in an apartment building is more common than many people realize. I have seen it firsthand in older buildings around Boston, where moisture problems seem to follow the seasons. The musty odor that creeps into a closet or the dark spots that appear on drywall are not just cosmetic issues. They signal a real indoor air quality concern that affects everyone in the unit.

Mold in apartment building environments often starts small but spreads fast if the underlying moisture is not addressed. Tenants notice the smell first, then the discoloration on walls or ceilings. By that point, the colony has already established itself. The most common types include *Cladosporium*, which shows up on wood and carpets, and *Stachybotrys chartarum*, the so-called toxic black mold that thrives on water-damaged drywall and fiberboard. Knowing what you are dealing with helps, but the real solution lies in fixing the moisture source.

Why It Matters for Your Health

Mold spores are airborne, and they travel through the HVAC system of any building. For someone with asthma, that can trigger attacks. Even healthy people develop coughing, sneezing, or itchy eyes after prolonged exposure. The CDC has linked indoor mold to respiratory problems, and the EPA guidelines recommend prompt remediation whenever visible mold appears. These are not just suggestions. They are based on solid research and real-world outcomes.

I have spoken to tenants who tried to clean mold with bleach, thinking it would kill the spores. Bleach is effective on hard, non-porous surfaces, but on drywall or wood, it only bleaches the stain while leaving the roots alive. A better approach for small patches is hydrogen peroxide or a commercial mold remover. But for anything larger than a square foot, you need professional Mold Remediation. That is especially true for *Stachybotrys chartarum*, which releases mycotoxins that a simple scrub cannot remove.



Landlord Responsibilities and Tenant Rights

In Massachusetts, landlords are required to provide habitable housing. That includes keeping the building free from moisture problems that lead to mold. If you report a leak behind the wall or a persistent musty odor, the landlord must investigate and fix it. The same goes for the HVAC system. A poorly maintained system can circulate mold spores throughout the building, making the problem worse rather than better.

Tenants can help by reporting issues early. A small water stain on the ceiling today can become a full-blown mold infestation in a few weeks. I recommend documenting everything. Take photos, keep emails, and note the dates of each report. That creates a record if you need

to escalate. The Boston Inspectional Services Department handles housing complaints, and they take mold seriously. But the best outcome is prevention, not a legal fight.

Practical Steps for Tenants

While you wait for the landlord to act, there are things you can do to protect yourself. First, reduce humidity in your unit. Use a dehumidifier, especially in bathrooms and kitchens. Wipe down surfaces after cooking or showering. Avoid blocking air vents, and make sure the bathroom fan vents to the outside. If you have a window unit air conditioner, clean the filter regularly. A clogged filter on an AC unit can breed mold just as easily as a wet basement.

Second, do not store boxes or clothes directly against exterior walls. In colder months, the temperature difference can cause condensation inside the wall, feeding mold on the drywall behind your dresser. Keep furniture a few inches away from walls to allow air circulation. That simple habit can prevent a lot of hidden growth.

Third, if you see mold on a non-porous surface like tile or glass, you can clean it with a vinegar solution or hydrogen peroxide. But never mix bleach with ammonia or other cleaners. That creates toxic gas. And if the mold covers more than a small patch, leave it alone and call the landlord. Disturbing a large colony sends spores into the air, making the indoor air quality worse for everyone.



When to Call a Professional

[Mold in apartment building](#) situations often require professional help, especially when the growth is inside walls or under floors. A Mold Inspection can identify the type and extent of the problem. The inspector may use a moisture meter or a borescope to look inside cavities without tearing open the wall. They can also test the air quality to see if spore counts are elevated.

If remediation is needed, the contractor will contain the area with plastic sheeting and use a HEPA filter vacuum to capture airborne spores. They will remove and replace moldy materials like drywall or fiberboard, then treat the underlying structure with an antimicrobial. That is the only way to ensure the mold does not come back. Painting over mold with epoxy paint is a

temporary fix. The paint may seal the surface, but the moisture remains, and the mold will find another way out.

Prevention Is the Real Solution

Moisture Control is the key to preventing mold in apartment building environments. That means fixing leaks immediately, improving ventilation, and controlling humidity. In Boston, where old buildings have brick walls and single-pane windows, condensation is a year-round challenge. Landlords should install exhaust fans in bathrooms and kitchens, insulate cold water pipes, and make sure the building envelope is sealed against rain and snowmelt.

Tenants can also help by keeping the unit clean and dry. But the responsibility for the building structure rests with the owner. If the roof leaks or the basement floods, that is not the tenant's fault. The landlord must address the source of moisture, not just paint over the stain. I have seen too many cases where a quick patch job hid the problem for a few months, only to have the mold return stronger than before.



A Note on Lichen and Mold

Some people confuse lichen with mold. Lichen is a combination of algae and fungus that grows on stone and bark outdoors. It is harmless and even beneficial to the environment. But indoors, what looks like a dry, crusty patch on a wall is almost always mold, not lichen. If you see fuzzy growth on drywall or fiberboard, treat it as mold until proven otherwise. A simple test is to dab it with a cotton swab dipped in bleach. If the color lifts, it is likely mold. If it does not, it could be dirt or a stain.

Final Thoughts

Living with mold in an apartment building is stressful, but you do not have to accept it. Know your rights, take small preventive steps, and push for professional remediation when needed. The health of everyone in the building depends on it. And remember, the goal is not just to remove visible mold, but to fix the moisture problem that let it grow in the first place. That is the only way to keep your home safe and your air clean.