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Mould in the home

Federal Environment Agency recommendation: get professional help in clean-up without resorting to disinfectants!

Professional clean-up of mould in the home, office and other rooms that are used regularly does not require use of disinfectants; in fact, these substances often pose a health risk. Chemical disinfectants are being used ever more frequently in mould clean-up, presumably on grounds that they solve the problem quickly. However, the disinfectants do not solve the problem and what is more, they can give rise to residents' health complaints or be the source of annoying odours for months.

Damp spots with mould growth have been proven to cause health problems, which is why the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) recommends getting professional help for clean-up. This includes eliminating the causes of mould and dampness, cleaning of materials that have become mouldy, and should this not be possible, their removal and subsequent intensive clean-up of the entire home to eliminate any mould spores still present. Protective measures for the sake of residents and workmen are to be taken during clean-up, which include sealing off the affected areas and wearing a mouth guard (see the 2005 Federal Environment Agency German-language publication *Leitfaden zur Ursachensuche und Sanierung bei Schimmelpilzwachstum in Innenräumen* for more detailed recommendations).

"A professionally done clean-up which attacks the root cause of mould formation does not require disinfection; in fact, it might even be harmful to health", said Dr. Thomas Holzmann, UBA Vice President.

Cost considerations increasingly lead those affected to choose not to eliminate the cause of mould and carry out the follow-up thorough cleaning; instead only superficial disinfection measures are taken. There are two reasons why this is not effective and might even be dangerous: firstly, many disinfectant procedures are not actually effective even if laboratory tests for effectiveness prove otherwise. More specifically the longevity of such measures is not guaranteed. Secondly, even if it were effective, disinfection is not enough to eliminate the effects on health of mould spores, as allergic and toxic reactions can also occur to dead spores. Complete clean-up requires complete elimination of both living and dead spores. Disinfectant agents are not only improper for application in professional clean-up measures, they can also give rise to health problems among residents. There is a risk that after

disinfection residents will inhale trace amounts of disinfectant or reaction products, which can lead to toxic or allergic reactions. Yet another problem is that of undesired side effects such as long-lasting odour annoyance. Disinfection can only offer additional safety in specific situations, for example in cases where mould infection in sensitive individuals must be avoided, e.g. hospital patients with weakened immunity. In this case disinfectant agents whose efficiency has been proven in practice must be used. Another case in which disinfection with ethanol (denatured alcohol) is a useful additional measure to prevent the further growth of mould is the small-scale removal by residents themselves, as the causes for mould growth are often unknown. .

The Federal Environment Agency tends to advise against widespread use of disinfectants for the purpose of mould clean-up and calls upon appraisers, supervisors of vocational education and insurance companies to cut down on the application of disinfectants for this purpose.

The Federal Environment Agency's German-language guidebook on mould is here:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennummer&Suchwort=2951 and
http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennummer&Suchwort=2199.

The guidebook *Hilfe! Schimmel im Haus* is here: http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennummer&Suchwort=2227

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