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growth industry

Trying to clear the air

Anti-mold industry grows with debate about danger

By [Kristi Arellano](#)
[Denver Post Staff Writer](#)

Got mold? Break out the petri dish and send in the dogs.

As concern grows about mold in homes and

commercial buildings, businesses devoted to helping owners find the fuzzy fungus have emerged, offering everything from visual inspections and air sampling to do-it-yourself mold kits and mold-sniffing dogs.

"A whole industry has been created off of the panic," said Carole Walker, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association.

A recent study failed to establish a link between mold and illnesses such as cancer and memory loss. But litigation is raising awareness of the issue, and mold cleanup can be expensive.

Just a few years ago, the idea of moldy houses in Colorado was practically unheard of. Most people believed mold was confined to humid states such as Texas, California and Florida where "black mold" and "toxic mold" first made headlines for their alleged health effects and the lawsuits that resulted.

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But recently, Coloradans have found mold of all types in their homes. At least 236 Colorado homeowners



Jerry Cleveland / Post

Samuel Rolf of Family Environmental, Restoration & Analytical Services Inc. in Denver checks a building Wednesday for mold. People used to think of mold as a problem only in humid areas, but more cases are popping up in Colorado.

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filed mold claims in 2003, according to Policy Holders of America, a Houston organization that focuses on mold claims and insurers. In 2001, 112 Coloradans had filed mold claims. That most likely represents only a portion of problems because most insurers exclude mold coverage from policies.

Depending on the type of test and the property inspected, mold testing can range from \$10 to \$2,000, experts said.

A number of Colorado companies offer visual inspection and air sampling services. At Family Environmental, Restoration & Analytical Services Inc. in Denver, workers perform a basic inspection and air test for \$300.

Integrated Microbiological Services LLC of Walled Lake, Mich., sells mold-test kits online for \$9.95. If the test shows a positive result, the company will perform an additional analysis on mold types for \$30, company chief executive Seth Norman said.

One of the newest entrants onto the scene is Mold Dog MD, an Aurora company that uses a 3-year-old Australian shepherd named Rolly to seek out mold. Rolly spent six months training at a Florida academy that certifies mold-sniffing dogs.

Owners Cristina and Pierre Barthle charge 25 cents per square foot - with a maximum of \$499 - to have Rolly sniff around.

Rolly is able to search 4,500 square feet in a day. The Barthles do not provide mold remediation because they said it would be a conflict of interest both to find the mold and to clean it up.

The relatively new company is finding favor with Realtors and contractors.

"Using the dog is an easy, simple process, and it's clean," said Sana Wood, a broker associate with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage's Denver Tech Center office. Wood typically recommends that her clients check for mold before they put their homes on the market or before they buy.

Chuck McCammon, a senior industrial hygienist with the Tri-County Health Department, the health department for Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas counties, estimates that he gets two to five calls per day from people worried about mold.

In many cases, the mold is caused by slow leaks or burst pipes. For other homeowners, mold can result from improper construction techniques that allow moisture to collect.

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Colorado's expansive soils led many homebuilders to start building homes with structural sub-floors in the 1990s. The floating sub-floors kept foundations from cracking but, if improperly ventilated, provided a better environment for mold.

The science surrounding mold and its effects on health remains hazy. A study released last month by the Institute of Medicine, part of the congressionally chartered National Academy of Sciences, linked mold to respiratory problems, including asthma and allergies. It did not establish a connection between mold and some of its other alleged health effects, including fatigue, memory loss and cancer.

"That's kind of what we've been saying all along," said Kim Calomino, director of technical affairs for the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Denver. "There has always been some skepticism that mold was causing some of these health problems."

Calomino said the homebuilders continue to improve their construction techniques so they can manage moisture and reduce mold problems.

Cristina Barthle of Mold Dog MD believes the results of the study likely won't change people's concerns about mold.

"People don't know if the mold in their house is going to cause problems," she said. "People aren't willing to take that chance."

Depending on the damage, the price of cleaning up mold can be as little as the cost of a bottle of bleach and some new drywall - or it can be many thousands of dollars. The Insurance Information Institute reported that, in Texas, the average mold claim costs \$35,000 and often exceeds \$100,000.

Denver-based MDC Holdings recently said in a lawsuit that it has spent \$19 million to clean up mold in 2,648 homes constructed along the Front Range between 1993 and 2002.

Douglas County-based Archstone-Smith said late last year that it shelled out millions of dollars to clean up mold in a Florida apartment complex that it owns. Among the costs outlined by the company were a \$38 million tab for ridding the 452-unit tower of mold and \$12 million spent to relocate tenants and replace their damaged furniture and clothing. The company was also forced to pay millions to settle a class-action lawsuit filed by residents who said they got sick from the mold in their homes.

And in Breckenridge, contractors have started remediation work on a 180-unit apartment complex

evacuated last year because of mold. Owner Vail Resorts Inc. said in a quarterly report this week that the remediation would cost \$5.5 million.

Skeptics of the mold situation say large payouts like the one Archstone-Smith residents received have helped fuel the mold-detection industry. But testing advocates say catching mold early can help owners avoid high cleanup costs.

"Our stance has always been that proper maintenance is the best way to avoid mold," said Walker of the insurance information association.

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This fungi, alternaria, is often found on dead and dying plants, is easily carried by the wind and is commonly found in house dust, carpets and textiles. It is believed to be one of the main fungal causes of allergies.

Aspergillus and penicillium are often listed in a shared category because they are difficult to tell apart. They are usually no problem for people with healthy immune systems but could be a danger to people with the AIDS virus or those undergoing chemotherapy.

Stachybotrys thrives on water-damaged materials, drywall, paper and certain types of insulation backing. It usually grows where moisture is present for a long period of time rather than the result of a sudden event such as a flood.

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