



## **PANEL FINDS MOLD IN BUILDING IS NO THREAT TO MOST PEOPLE, BUT...**

**By Anahad O'Connor / New York Times May 26, 2004**

Stepping into an issue that has alarmed homeowners and led to hundreds of lawsuits and billions of dollars in insurance payments, a government panel of experts reported yesterday that toxic mold in homes did not appear to pose a serious health threat to MOST people. Though the experts said mold and indoor dampness were associated with respiratory problems and symptoms of asthma in certain susceptible people, they found no evidence of a link between mold and conditions like brain or neurological damage, reproductive problems and cancer. They based their conclusions on a review of hundreds of scientific papers and reports but warned that the research was limited and that more studies were needed.

The panel, which consisted of epidemiologists, toxicologists and pediatricians, was convened by the Institute of Medicine, an arm of the national Academy of Sciences that advises the federal government on health issues. Its findings come as public concern about mold-related health problems grows, stoked in part by lawsuits and accounts of people driven from their homes and schools by mold. In 2002, insurers in the United States paid out @ 2.5 billion in mold-related claims.

Yesterday's findings drew criticism from homeowners who say they have experienced the phenomenon. "I get calls from people every day saying they've had water problems, windows that leak, or water plumbing leaks behind the walls," said Janet Ahmad, president of Homeowners for Better Building in San Antonio, an advocacy group for people affected by mold. One scenario is "Somebody in the house usually has nosebleeds. The children go away for the weekend and the children stop coughing and having nosebleeds."

But the government panel said even the link between mold and respiratory problems had yet to be demonstrated conclusively. "We know that when people are in damp spaces they report more upper respiratory tract problems and asthma symptoms", said its chairwoman, Dr. Noreen Clark, dean of the School of public Health at the University of Michigan. "But we don't know that mold is the cause, because dampness is associated with dust mites, bacteria, and can lead to chemical emissions from buildings and from furnishings. Dr. Jordan N. Fink, an expert on allergy and immunology at the medical college of Wisconsin in Milwaukee who was not a member of the panel, disagreed, saying there was strong evidence that dampness and mold cause allergic diseases. "The allergy literature over the years demonstrates that molds can cause asthma and hay fever," said Dr. Fink, a professor of pediatrics and medicine. Dr. Fink did agree with the finding that there was no basis to claims that molds could produce non-allergic health problems. In the more than 70 years that scientists have studied molds, he said, "you would think that someone would have reported some evidence of that".

Melinda Ballard, a Texas homeowner who won a 32 million dollar judgment against an insurer in a mold-related lawsuit several years ago (later reduced to \$4 million), said her mold-infested home made her family violently ill in matter of months. Her husband suffered memory loss, had trouble breathing and started coughing up blood. He had brain seizures that were evident in brain scans. Their son developed stomach problems and diarrhea. A mold expert found that they were breathing in mycotoxins, a mold often caused by water damage, and persuaded them to leave, Mrs. Ballard said. Some scientists say mycotoxins can cause brain and lung damage. The Ballard's lived in Austin, not far from a school where large amounts of stachybotrys, another similar mold linked to health problems, were found in 2000. Some teachers and students became sick as a result.

“When so many people have been exposed to similar varieties of mold and they’re all reporting the same symptoms, the bottom line is: Are we all pathological liars, or is there something to this?” said Mrs. Ballard, who formed an organization called Policyholders of America.