

# Reducing Mold in Your Home May Start with Your Air Conditioner

As recent news coverage here in Tampa revealed, a home is meant to protect you and your family from the outside elements, not expose you to a host of allergens, airborne irritants, and toxins that can make you ill. The biggest potential problem – as we covered through a post titled [Responding to the Mold Outbreak at VA Bay Pines Center](#) – is mold, but other airborne irritants can also pose a problem, such as pet dander, dust, and dust mites. In this post, we encourage you to reduce your exposure to indoor airborne irritants and provide guidance to reduce the levels of airborne irritants in your home.

## ***Keep the Air Conditioning on in the Summer***

Mold grows best in warm, humid conditions, so it makes sense that air conditioning is one of the most powerful weapons in the battle against mold. One of the most effective ways to prevent mold from getting a foothold in your home is to keep your air conditioner(s) running during the hot, humid days of summer. In addition to cooling your home, air conditioning removes humidity from the air, and low humidity (ideally between 30 and 50 percent) inhibits mold growth.



Unfortunately, a poorly maintained heating, air-conditioning, and ventilation (HVAC) system can be a breeding ground for mold and facilitate the spread of airborne irritants throughout your home. The risk is higher for those who run their AC units intermittently, because mold can grow in the system on warm, humid days when the system is not in use, and then spores can spread more easily when the system is turned on and the spores dry and become airborne.

### ***Other Airborne Irritants and Toxins***

Mold isn't the only substance that can irritate your lungs and nasal passages and make you ill. Pet hair and dander, pollen,

dust, dust mites, and even toxins from household furnishings and cleaning agents such as dryer sheets and liquid fabric softener can become airborne and cause irritation and illness when inhaled. The problem is compounded in forced-air systems that tend to stir up these irritants and when any fans are running in the home. A properly maintained forced-air system is designed to filter out most of these airborne irritants, but in systems that are poorly maintained, dust and other debris can collect in the filters and the ductwork and spread throughout the home.

### ***Symptoms: The Canary in the Coal Mine***

Some people give little thought to the air quality in their home until someone in the family begins to experience symptoms, such as the following:

- Frequent colds or flu
- Chronic coughing, sneezing, or wheezing
- Sinusitis
- Ear infections
- Asthma or trouble breathing
- Nasal or lung congestion
- Frequent headaches
- Dry, itchy skin
- Dry or watery eyes
- Sore throat
- Fatigue

Experiencing these symptoms is not necessarily a bad thing. Symptoms are like the canary in the coal mine that provide an early warning that something isn't right. In this case, these symptoms *maybe* a warning sign that the air quality in your home needs some attention.

**Note:** Keep in mind that people vary in their sensitivity to airborne irritants and toxins. Just because everyone in your

family is breathing the same air and only one person is sick doesn't mean you can rule out poor indoor air quality as the cause.

### ***Confirming or Ruling Out a Potential HVAC Problem***

You can end up spending a great deal of money fixing an HVAC problem or mold issue that doesn't exist, so investigate first:

1. Check your home for visible mold, especially in the bathrooms, kitchen, laundry room, and basement or crawlspaces.
2. Check in and around vents and check the air filter in your HVAC system for signs of mold, excessive dust, or other problems.
3. Check the drainage pipe attached to your furnace to ensure it's draining properly. (*Central AC units must have a vent to allow condensation to drain out of the unit.*)
4. Take a big whiff inside each room (including the basement and crawlspaces) to determine whether it smells musty. (*If your sense of smell isn't very good, enlist a friend or family member to perform the smell test.*)
5. Clear out of your home for a week or so to see whether your symptoms clear up. If they do, chances are that your home is making you sick, and it probably has something to do with the air quality.
6. If you're still unsure, hire a service that specializes in air quality to inspect your home for possible problems. (*The most serious issues are typically mold-related, so consider looking for a company that specializes in mold testing and remediation.*)

### ***Reducing Airborne Irritants in Your Home***

To significantly reduce levels of airborne irritants in your home, we recommend the following:

- Have your HVAC system inspected and serviced once or twice a year, typically in the spring and fall, especially if you live in Tampa, Florida. Your HVAC service technician should perform a routine cleaning of the blower compartment and check the air filter and condenser drain pipe.
- If you have a forced-air HVAC system, check the air filter monthly and change it at least twice a year. Ask your HVAC contractor to recommend quality air filters for your unit.
- If you have a forced air system, have the ducts cleaned at least once every three years. Duct cleaning should include the supply and return ducts, all registers and grills, heat exchangers, heating and cooling coils, condensate drain pans, and the fan motor and housing.
  - **Warning:** Some duct cleaning services offer the option to have a chemical biocide applied (inside the ducts) to kill bacteria and fungi and prevent future growth. Keep in mind that if you have known or suspected chemical sensitivities, having a chemical biocide applied is not recommended. Chemicals, even those marketed as “natural,” can cause people who are sick or have chemical sensitivities to experience negative reactions.
- Vacuum carpets once or twice a week with a high-quality HEPA-certified vacuum cleaner.
- Dust once or twice a week with a damp rag to avoid stirring up dust. Be sure to dust the blades of any overhead fans.
- Keep a reasonable number of furry pets, if any, and take steps to prevent dander, such as bathing your pets regularly. (Pets are one of the biggest sources of indoor allergens.)
- Have any visible mold treated professionally.
- If you have (or have had) any water damage to your home

(for example, as a result of a toilet or washing machine that overflowed), have a professional assess and address any issues.

- Place dehumidifiers in any areas that are damp, such as a basement or crawlspace.
- Make sure your clothes dryer vents to the outside and that all connections to the vents are sealed tight.
- Eliminate the use of commercial dryer sheets, air fresheners, and chemical cleaning products.
- Keep the doors and windows closed when pollen counts are high but open them on cooler, drier days to air out your home.
- Keep bugs at bay, including cockroaches and dust mites.
- Limit the number of indoor plants and care for them properly to avoid mold.
- If possible, eliminate or reduce the use of wall-to-wall carpeting in your home – one of the top sources of indoor allergens.

Keep in mind that the less you do to eliminate irritants and toxins in the air you breathe, the more your body must do to filter out and eliminate those irritants and toxins from your system. In extreme cases, the level of irritants and toxins can overwhelm the body's ability to filter and eliminate them, which can seriously affect your health or the health of a family member. We encourage you to take the steps necessary to improve your home's air quality, so you and your family can breathe easier and maintain optimal health and fitness.

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