

Mold Scams 101 Property Owner Beware!

In a perfect world you could trust everyone, but it's not a perfect world. Like every industry, the mold business has its share of scammers and con men seeking to profit from your lack of knowledge about mold. Here are the top 8 mold scams and tips on how to avoid them.

Mold Scam # 1: Mold Inspectors Who Do Mold Removal (Note: There is a local Fresno CA company that does both!)

The worst perpetrators of mold scams are "mold inspectors" who are also in the mold remediation business (mold removal). Mold remediation is a very profitable business. Many mold removal contractors use free or deeply discounted mold inspections as a means to drum up expensive remediation jobs for themselves. This is a common scam that works almost every time if the mold remediation company does not have a 3rd party data review service. In some areas because of a lack of trained inspectors it is necessary to use one party for both the inspection and remediation. However, these remediators should have an independent 3rd party reviewing their data to determine if a mold problem exists, and also have a 3rd party reviewing their data to ensure cleanup is complete.

How to Avoid It:

If someone is offering a FREE or at a low cost (say below \$400.00) mold inspection you should be curious. Almost always a "Free" mold inspection will find mold which results in extra work. Mold inspectors should never be attached to the outcome of a laboratory report. The best way to avoid this mold scam is to hire an inspector who is not in the remediation business or ensure that the remediation firm is using independent 3rd party review to check ALL of their work. That's the only way to ensure an unbiased inspection report.

Mold Scam # 2: Free Post-Remediation Clearance Testing

The final step in the mold removal process is a post-remediation survey done to verify and document that the remediation was in fact successful. The survey should be done before any reconstruction work begins so the inspector can visually see that there is no mold left on the remediated materials. Many mold remediation contractors offer "FREE" post-remediation clearance testing. Clearance testing is vital to the mold remediation process. Insurance companies, mortgage lenders and prospective buyers of your property in the future will want to see written confirmation that the mold issue was resolved. Post-remediation clearance testing should never be performed by a mold removal contractor waiting to get paid for his work. With thousands of dollars on the line, it is highly unlikely that a contractor will fail his own work.

How To Avoid It:

The way to avoid this scam is the same as Mold Scam #1. Have your post-remediation survey and clearance test performed by a Certified Mold Inspector who does not work for your remediation contractor.

Mold Scam # 3: Encapsulating Fungal Growth

Encapsulation is a trade term used by certain mold remediation contractors. The goal of encapsulation is to essentially glue any remaining mold in place to prevent the release of spores. This is possible to do and may even be the preferred (or the only realistic or economic) method of choice in some cases. However, if you have fixed the water problem, dried the remediated materials and removed all of the mold growth, encapsulation should not be necessary. As a rule, encapsulation is not an acceptable stand-alone solution for a successful remediation project. For prevention purposes, there are now proven treatment products that work to prevent the return of mold to the newly installed building materials – these are not encapsulates as they are not designed to cover the mold.

Deciding To Encapsulate:

In the remediation process, contractors will scrape, sand, grind, and wire brush as much mold as they can from salvageable construction materials such as studs, ceiling and floor joists. At some point they determine that they have removed as much mold growth as possible for the amount of money they are charging you. At that point, if your contractor is confident in his work, he will inform you that your project is ready for a post-remediation survey and clearance test. If they are not completely confident that the job will pass a post-remediation air test, often times they will spray a sealant (or encapsulate) over the construction materials inside the containment area.

There are four reasons why contractors decide to encapsulate:

The Legitimate Reasons:

- He suspects that there may still be traces of mold left in areas that cannot be accessed without major demolition and encapsulating those areas will inhibit spore release.
- He suspects there is a possibility that moisture is still a factor in or around the remediated area and, as a precautionary measure, he wants to apply a water seal treatment to the salvaged materials to protect them from that moisture.
- There are contractors who process their work to exemplary levels and then apply ‘shields’ for future prevention purposes – these contractors will allow for testing at the client’s discretion as they normally pass whether at the end of remediation or after applying their final step products.

The Scam Reason:

- His work is sub-standard. He simply did a bad job of remediation the mold and to hide his poor workmanship, he uses encapsulation (usually a solid color) to "paint over" it.

How To Tell the Difference:

When encapsulation is done properly by a responsible remediation contractor, the encapsulate product should always be clear so that a third-party Inspector can visually see the remediated materials in this post-remediation survey and confirm that no mold growth remains. When encapsulation is done to cover up a bad job, the contractor will use a solid color encapsulate product (typically red or white) to hide whatever mold they left behind, making it impossible for

the Inspector to verify that all mold has been removed. Some unscrupulous contractors try to encapsulate with KILZ, which is just a stain killing paint with absolutely no anti-microbial properties or ability to encapsulate mold spores. Some actually use regular paint which insidiously provides additional moisture in support of the underlying mold issue – worsening an already costly situation.

How To Avoid It:

Before your remediation contractor begins, ask him if he intends to use an encapsulate and, if so, insist that whatever product he uses must dry clear. No solid color encapsulates and no KILZ. Secondly, before your contractor applies an encapsulate, ask him to take you into the containment area (the work area) and explain to you why he believes encapsulation is necessary. This is different than a professional contractor who has performed the necessary remediation and then applies a preventive shield – ask about their warranty coverage to uncover any suspect disclaimers or restrictive limits of liability.

Tips on Encapsulation:

Before encapsulation can be considered:

- Whatever water problem that occurred which led to mold growth must be corrected and unlikely to occur again. Mold will grow on encapsulating materials if the materials get wet.
- All mold growth has been removed from surfaces where it is possible to remove it. Encapsulating is not an alternative to mold removal.
- The substrate or surfaces to be encapsulated must be completely dry. Otherwise mold will grow right through the encapsulate.
- Encapsulating mold growth may not be safe or an adequate safeguard where immune compromised people live.
- Encapsulating should be considerably less expensive than actually removing all of the mold contaminated materials. Encapsulation is not a permanent fix. Completely removing all of the contaminated material is always best.
- Encapsulates are very limited in their effectiveness and should not be confused with anti-microbial bonding agents that work specifically to deny mold spores the ability to grow by separating them from their food sources. Encapsulates, by their nature and design, leave mold spores in place on their food sources and are not effective in inhibiting future growth and damage.

Mold Scam # 4: Off-Site Sampling

Off-site sampling is the most blatant form of deliberate mold fraud. It is a scam often perpetuated by mold inspectors who are either in the remediation business themselves or receive referral fees from remediation contractors. It works like this: The inspector has a private shed where he stores construction materials such as drywall. The materials are periodically sprayed with water and left inside the shed where mold is allowed to grow rampant. Before coming to your property, the inspector collects samples from the shed that are sure to have very high counts of dangerous molds and then passes them off as your samples. After frightening you with the alarming results, he then urges you to take immediate action, which of course includes remediation, either by him or a contractor he is in cahoots with. The result is tens of thousands of dollars in mold remediation that never needed to be done.

How To Avoid It:

The best way to avoid this scam is to avoid using mold inspectors who are also in the remediation business. Another safeguard against off-site sampling is to ask your inspector to show you the sampling media he uses at your property. Air sampling media such as spore traps have a unique serial number printed on them by the manufacturer to identify the location from where the sample was collected. The location and the serial number should be written on a Chain of Custody form and sent to an AIHA EMLAP accredited laboratory* for analysis. Ask your inspector to show you the sampling media serial numbers and confirm that the same numbers are written on the chain of custody. When you get your lab results from the lab, make sure the same serial numbers on the documents match the numbers on the sampling media and the chain of custody. Most inspectors do not supply the client with a copy of the chain of custody, so you may have to write the serial numbers down yourself, but a little bit of writing is worth the peace of mind. Some sampling media, such as tape, swabs and dust collectors, are not marked with serial numbers, which is fine, but make sure your inspector writes an identifying mark on the media and that the same mark is written on the Chain of Custody to identify its origin.

*AIHA's EMLAP accredited laboratories specialize in analysis of microorganisms commonly detected in air, fluids and bulk samples, as part of IAQ investigations. The AIHA accreditation program is a rigorous, thorough and lengthy process involving all operations and personnel of the accredited site.

Mold Scam # 5: Using Heat to Remediate Mold

Some contractors claim that applying heat to a structure is an effective way to remediate mold. This is a bogus claim. While mold can be killed by heat, as can every other living organism, there is no evidence to support the notion that heat treating a house will kill all the mold, not will heat destroy all of the allergens and irritants that are associated with mold growth.

Killing Mold Is Not the Same as Remediating Mold:

The goal of remediation is not to "kill" mold, it is to remove it. If mold is not removed, it has not been remediated - it is still in your house. The only good news about dead mold is that it stops eating the construction materials in your home. But mold spores, whether viable or non-viable (alive or dead) still have the same harmful effects on humans and animals.

The small amount of research that has been done with the current heat treatment technologies has been done only in laboratories. Even if killing mold was the goal of remediation (and it is not), but even it was, there is no documentation available that supports any claim that whole-house heat treatments actually kills hidden mold. In fact, some studies indicate that hidden growth inside walls is still culturally (alive) after heat treatment.

Traditional Drying Methods Are Best:

Heat treatment technologies can help dry out a structure and slow mold growth, provided sufficient ventilation is factored into the process into remove the water vapor resulting from the heat. However, in the final analysis, traditional methods of drying, such as dehumidifiers and fans, will also dry out a building without subjecting the entire structure to the thermal stress that heat treatments cause.

How To Avoid It:

If you want to avoid exposure to molds that can affect your health, you must physically remove all mold growth (dead or alive) inside your building. If mold is not removed, it has not been remediated, and could return if moisture from humidity or water intrusion ever reoccurs. The best way to avoid this scam is with a standard remediation protocol that involves the actual removal of mold growth.

Mold Scam # 6: Ozone Generators

Many sellers of ozone generators have jumped on the mold bandwagon. Resellers and dealers of ozone generators make false statements about the ability of ozone air purifiers to kill mold. It is not true. False advertisements of ozone devices often use misleading terms such as "energized oxygen" and "pure air" suggesting that ozone is a healthy kind of oxygen. The fact is, ozone is a toxic gas with vastly different chemical and toxicological properties from oxygen. Claims that ozone generators sold as air purifiers are effective at controlling indoor air pollution are simply not true.

Several federal agencies have established health standards or recommendations to limit human exposure to ozone. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has established an ozone level of .05 ppm (parts per million) as the maximum level allowable in an enclosed spaces. Relatively low amounts of ozone can cause chest pain, coughing, shortness of breath, and, throat irritation. Ozone may also worsen chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma and compromise the ability of the body to fight respiratory infections. Exercise during exposure to ozone causes a greater amount of ozone to be inhaled, and increases the risk of harmful respiratory effects (US EPA, 1996a, 1996b).

Some manufacturers and resellers of Ozone Generators sold as air purifiers claim that these products help to control mold. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, however, (EPA) these products may very well add to indoor air pollution and even make indoor mold conditions worse.

The EPA web site states that:

- available scientific evidence shows that ozone has little potential to remove indoor air contaminants
- ozone is not effective at removing viruses, bacteria, mold, or other biological pollutants
- ozone is not even effective at removing odor-causing chemicals.

In fact, results from controlled studies show that some ozone generators produce unsafe concentrations of ozone even when a user follows the manufacturer's operating instructions.

Buyer Beware:

Beware of misleading advertising claims stating of implying that a particular brand of ozone generator is "EPA APPROVED". Several brands of ozone generators have EPA establishment numbers on their packaging. This number helps EPA identify the specific facility that produces the product.

THE DISPLAY OF THIS NUMBER DOES NOT IMPLY EPA ENDORSEMENT OR SUGGEST IN ANY WAY THAT EPA HAS FOUND THE PRODUCT TO BE EITHER SAFE OR EFFECTIVE.

The EPA does not certify air cleaning devices, recommend air cleaning devices or endorse manufacturers of air cleaning devices. For more information from the EPA regarding the use or effectiveness of ozone generators, please visit their web site at:

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/ozonegen.html>

Mold Scam # 7: House Cooking

"House cooking" is an old scam designed to get the worst possible air test results. This scam is commonly pulled by inspectors who benefit in some way if your air sample looks bad. The way it works is: the inspector shuts all the windows and turns on the furnace or air conditioner in order to elevate the number of mold spores in the air before taking samples. Some will even go so far as to turn on ceiling fans and blowers, fluff up couch pillows, and run a vacuum cleaner to get as much mold as possible into the air before taking a sample. The purpose is to cause high levels of detectable mold to justify expensive mold remediation work.

One of the objectives of an air test is to determine if there is any difference between the indoor air and the outdoor air, in terms of mold spore levels and mold types. Therefore, closing the doors and windows before sampling is the proper way to perform an air test because it separates the air. Turning on the HVAC system is not a scam in and of itself. But there should be a valid cause for doing so and it should never be on for more than 20 minutes prior to sampling. Anything more than that, including running fans and blowers, vacuuming, fluffing up furnishing, etc., is considered a deliberate attempt to make the indoor air look worse than it actually is under normal living conditions.

How To Avoid It:

The best way to prepare for testing is to close all doors and windows 6 to 8 hours before testing. If any red flags or suspect conditions are detected in the visual inspection, the inspector should sample from that area. If no suspect conditions are detected, the inspector may choose to collect a sample from a central location or run the HVAC system for 20 minutes, turn it off, then collect the sample approximately 5 feet away from the HVAC cold air return, (the same procedure is proper if the doors and windows are open at the time the inspector arrives).

Mold Scam # 8: Insurance Scams

It's hard to imagine insurance companies doing anything improper or unethical. But like any company in business to make money, what is proper or improper, ethical or unethical, right or wrong, is not defined by moral absolutes or standards. It is defined by legal technicalities. Fairness, integrity, and conscience are nice words to flaunt. But the bottom line is always comes down to profit margins, not nice words.

Here are some profit-driven business practices of insurance companies to look out for.
(DISCLAIMER: Not ALL insurance companies)

1. Hiring only "preferred" inspectors and remediators who are loyal to the insurance companies (not the insured) and who will not look too hard for mold.
2. Requiring preferred testers to restrict the air flow of their sampling pump to purposely lower the spore count in air samples.
3. Requiring the inspector to inspect only, and not sample.

How To Avoid It:

The best way to avoid getting one-sided mold information is to hire your own professionals. More unbiased reporting, hire a mold inspector certified by the American Indoor Air Quality Council. For proper mold removal, hire a mold remediation contractor trained by the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC). For reconstructing your project after remediation, hire a professional licensed by the Contractors State License Board.