

## **Annexe 3 - Health effects of damp and mould**

Damp and mould within the home can produce allergens, irritants, mould spores and other toxins that are harmful to health.

Even if visible mould is not present, dampness alone can increase the risk of health problems.

Excessive moisture can promote the growth of microorganisms such as mould and other fungi, certain species of house dust mites, bacteria or viruses.

The more serious the damp and mould problem and the longer it is left untreated, the worse the health impacts and risks are likely to be.

Most people come into contact with the substances produced by damp and mould by breathing them in. This means they predominantly affect the airways and lungs.

Damp and mould can cause disease and ill health in anyone, but people with underlying health conditions, weakened immune systems, and some other groups of people are at greater risk of ill-health from damp and mould (see 'People at increased risk from damp and mould').

During the inquest into the death of Awaab Ishak, the Coroner concluded that Awaab's death was a result of a severe respiratory condition due to prolonged exposure to mould (<https://www.judiciary.uk/prevention-of-future-death-reports/awaabishak-prevention-of-future-deaths-report/>). Awaab's death highlights just how crucial it is for landlords to understand the health risks of damp and mould and respond with urgency when cases are reported.

Landlords should advise any tenant who is concerned about the symptoms they are experiencing to consult a healthcare professional. Landlords should not delay action to await medical evidence or opinion - medical evidence is not a requirement for action, and damp and mould should always be addressed promptly to protect tenant health.

### **Respiratory effects**

Damp and mould predominantly affect the airways and lungs. The respiratory effects of damp and mould can cause serious illness and, in the most severe cases, death. The respiratory effects include:

- General symptoms such as cough, wheeze and shortness of breath
- Increased risk of airway infections, including aspergillosis (an infection of the airways with the fungus *Aspergillus*)
- Development or worsening of allergic airway diseases such as rhinitis (a condition causing nasal congestion, runny nose, sneezing and itching), asthma and other conditions that involve inflammation of the airways (including bronchitis, hypersensitivity pneumonitis and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)).

In 2019, the presence of damp and/or mould in English residences was estimated to be associated with approximately 5,000 cases of asthma and approximately 8,500 lower respiratory infections among children and adults. In addition, damp and mould were estimated to contribute to 1 to 2% of new cases of allergic rhinitis in that year. Alternative data sources, primarily from self-reporting, suggest that the percentage of dwellings affected by damp and/or mould may be even higher than the estimates used for this study, in which case the total number of cases could be 3 to 8 times greater.

## **Other physical health effects**

Some people who are exposed to damp and mould might experience adverse health outcomes that are not linked to their airways or lungs. These include:

- Irritation of the eye potentially leading to allergic conjunctivitis
- Eczema, and other patches of itchy skin or skin rashes
- Other fungal infections (including, but not exclusively those of the skin), especially in people with weakened immune systems

## **Mental health effects**

Some people who are exposed to damp and mould might experience poor mental health as a result of living in a home with damp and mould.

This could be due to:

- Unpleasant living conditions
- Destruction of property and belongings
- Anxiety related to physical health impacts and/or looking after a relative suffering from damp and mould-related illnesses
- Frustration with poor advice and/or being blamed for damp and mould
- Social isolation as a result of not wanting visitors in the home
- Delays in response or repairs following reporting of damp and mould and/or poor quality of repairs

## **People at increased risk from damp and mould**

Certain individuals may be at increased risk of the health impacts of damp and mould exposure. This could be due to health-related or age-related vulnerabilities, or because they are less able to report and act on guidance related to damp and mould, or simply because they are more likely to live in a home with damp and mould.

## **People most at risk of health issues from damp and mould**

While damp and mould pose a risk to anyone's health and should always be acted on quickly, it is particularly important that damp and mould is addressed with urgency for the groups below as they are more vulnerable to significant health impacts:

- People with a pre-existing health condition (for example allergies, asthma, COPD, cystic fibrosis, other lung diseases and cardiovascular disease) who are at risk of their condition worsening and have a higher risk of developing fungal infections and/or additional allergies
- People of all ages who have a weakened immune system, such as people who have cancer or are undergoing chemotherapy, people who have had a transplant, or other people who are taking medications that suppress their immune system

- People living with a mental health condition
- Pregnant women, their unborn babies and women who have recently given birth, who may have weakened immune systems
- Children and young people whose organs are still developing and are therefore more likely to suffer from physical conditions such as respiratory problems
- Children and young people who are at risk of worsening mental health older people
- People who are bedbound, housebound or have mobility problems making it more difficult for them to get out of a home with damp and mould and into fresh air

People who fall into more than one of these categories are likely to be particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of damp and mould. Landlords should not delay action to await medical evidence or opinion - medical evidence is not a requirement for action.

## **Groups who are most likely to live in homes with damp and mould**

Certain groups are more likely than others to live in homes with damp and mould. This includes:

- People with a long-term illness
- People who struggle to heat their homes and/or are experiencing fuel poverty
- People on low incomes
- People with disabilities
- People from ethnic minority backgrounds
- people living in temporary accommodation

## **Housing conditions that increase tenants' risk of living in a home with damp and mould**

In England, housing stock varies significantly in age, design and building materials, each with different challenges in relation to damp and mould. There are a variety of housing conditions that put people at increased risk of exposure to damp and mould.]They include:

- Homes where residents feel unable to open windows due to concerns about security, noise, or high outdoor air pollution
- Homes that are poorly or inadequately insulated
- Homes with inefficient or ineffective and expensive to run heating systems
- Homes that are poorly ventilated
- Homes without adequate damp proof courses

- Homes that are poorly maintained
- Homes that are overcrowded

Landlords should proactively investigate their housing stock for damp and mould issues, particularly when homes meet any of these criteria.

## **People who are most likely to face barriers to reporting damp and mould**

Tenants may face barriers which may mean they struggle to report damp and mould to their landlord. This may be due to knowledge, language, literacy or communication barriers, personal circumstances, a lack of awareness of legal standards and housing rights in England, or fear of eviction or discrimination, among other things.

Landlords should consider how they might best support these tenants, by building trust and working with other professionals who may be able to provide additional support (see below 'Responding with urgency and sensitivity and taking tenants' needs into consideration' in the section 'Identifying and addressing damp and mould in your property' and 'Building relationships with other professionals' in 'Reducing the risk of damp and mould developing'.

Types of tenants who might face barriers to reporting include:

- People from ethnic minority backgrounds
- People who have moved to the UK within the past 10 years, including people seeking refuge and foreign students
- People moving in and out of homelessness and/or in insecure tenures
- People with a learning disability and/or a neurodiverse condition such as autism
- People living with a mental health condition
- People who are dependent on alcohol and/or drugs
- People in receipt of welfare benefits
- People who live in houses in multiple occupation (HMO)
- people living in the private rented sector who have a fear of eviction
- People without a diagnosed mental health condition or registered disability but with either temporary or on-going support needs