

Damp and mould in rented housing

Public health information for social housing agencies and private landlords

1. Health implications of damp and mould in residential properties

Respiratory disease is an umbrella term for conditions affecting the lungs and airways, including lung cancers, infections, and chronic diseases such as asthma. The UK has some of the highest mortality rates from these conditions in Europe, with outcomes remaining broadly static over the past decade.¹ Preventable deaths from respiratory diseases increase with socioeconomic deprivation, with areas of the North West having some of the highest levels of deprivation and respiratory mortality in the country.²

Poor housing conditions affect respiratory health throughout life. Multiple studies have established an association between poor housing and childhood asthma, particularly in relation to mould and dampness.³⁻⁶ Hospitalisation for respiratory infections³⁻⁶ in children has a dose-response relationship with a number of measures of poor housing quality.⁷ Exposure to these conditions in childhood continues to have detrimental health effects later in life, including reduced lung function and increased respiratory disease in adulthood.⁸⁻¹⁰ In adults, the European Community Respiratory Health Survey found a statistically significant relationship between indoor mould growth and asthma symptoms.¹¹ Similarly, overcrowded and under-ventilated housing is an important risk factor for respiratory infections such as tuberculosis.¹² Housing issues also cause and exacerbate respiratory problems in older people; the group most likely to be affected by fuel poverty.¹³ The resultant cold and damp housing is associated with increased respiratory symptoms and chronic respiratory conditions.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Older people are disproportionately affected by excess winter deaths, which are strongly associated with cold homes and subsequent respiratory illness.¹⁷

The Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing, and Communities has recently written to housing providers and local authority leaders, re-emphasising their responsibilities under the Housing Act 2004.¹⁸ This includes using of the Housing health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) to identify and remediate hazards.¹⁹ This note is intended to provide additional public health rationale and practical activities to supplement the guidance and responsibilities provided in the aforementioned legislation.

2. Assessing mould and damp problems

In response to rehousing requests which include reference to damp and asthma, a housing officer should visit the premise to ascertain:

1. If there is a structural problem causing dampness in the property e.g. leaks from pipework, roofs, leaking gutters, penetrating damp through external walls, or rising damp.
2. Whether the ventilation, is adequate for the size of property and number of occupants, and whether any ventilation has been obstructed.
3. How washing is dried e.g. tumble drier, clothes horse, over radiators. Drying clothes inside increases the risk of damp and mould, but this may be the only option in households without

access to private outdoor space or during wet weather. Advice on how to manage this can be found in section 4.

4. How the house is heated, and whether this is adequate. Cold houses are subject to increase condensation and any dampness tends to persist and increase in colder weather.
5. Whether the house is overcrowded, resulting in additional moisture which may not be accounted for in the ventilation of the property. This is particularly notable in houses of multiple occupancy, where numerous people share the same room, washing, and cooking facilities.
6. Whether any additional sources of moisture are present above what would usually be expected for the property. For example, cooking is unlikely to be a problem in itself, but can lead to condensation if pans are left boiling for prolonged periods.
7. The extent of the mould problem and the rooms affected. Total areas of mould exceeding 10 square feet should be considered particularly significant, and where mould is present in more than rooms that just bathrooms and kitchens. Mould in bedrooms is particularly associated with lung disease.²⁰⁻²¹

After reviewing the property and the risk factors, the housing officer should determine whether the mould is intrinsic to the condition of the property, and if there are any significant aggravating factors associated with the daily use of the property. Any causes of dampness which are the landlord's responsibility should be identified and the landlord made aware of their responsibilities, which may include safe removal of the existing mould.

If the property is sound and reasonable standard and there are no intrinsic risk factors for mould, then the occupiers should be given advice on reducing the risk factors set out above and how to safely get rid of existing mould (see section 4).

3. Requests for repairs or rehousing

The recent death of a toddler from a fungal respiratory infection secondary to mould and dampness within his home has highlighted the need for housing authorities to respond effectively to reports of mould and damp.¹⁸ This includes prompt assessment in response to reports of mould and damp, arranging remediation and reviewing its effectiveness, and communication with tenants regarding ongoing measures they can take to reduce damp within their property. Special consideration is also required regarding requests for rehousing on grounds of health conditions which may be exacerbated by damp. For example, asthma may be triggered or exacerbated by mould spores, with chronic inflammation can lead to potentially severe and progressive allergic alveolitis. For those with impaired immunity, exposure to mould can cause fungal lung infections which may be severe and life-threatening. The following factors should be considered when assessing requests for repairs rehousing:

- Where mould is extensive within the property (>10 square feet/1 square metre) and there are intrinsic faults within the property causing the mould, then requests for repairs or rehousing should be carried out urgently wherever occupants have pre-existing lung disease (particularly asthma) and/or include young children.

- Where damp is assessed to be due to activities within the home, the occupiers should be given advice on reducing the risk and the situation kept under review to ensure that the problem is remediated.
- If the dwelling is damp due to activities within the home and there are young children within the household with pre-existing lung disease, consider referring the family via a safeguarding pathway to ensure the problem given multidisciplinary consideration.

The following NICE guidance may be useful for local authorities and housing bodies wishing to improve indoor air quality in houses in their area: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng149>

4. Mitigation advice for tenants

Where activities within the property are likely to be contributing to mould and damp, advice should be provided to tenants on how to reduce the accumulation of moisture. Particular care should be taken to communicate this information effectively to households who are unable to read material written in English, or who have no previous experience of managing mould and damp in cold and wet climates.

Households should be informed that everyday activities like cooking, showering and drying clothes create moisture in the home which can lead to condensation. Over time, this moisture provides an environment for mould to grow and spread. This can be prevented by:

- Reducing the amount of moisture produced in the property** e.g. drying clothes outdoors or in an externally-vented tumble dryer, covering pans with lids when cooking, and closing internal doors when showering or cooking.
- Preventing moisture from becoming trapped in spaces** e.g. leaving a gap between furniture and external walls or radiators to allow air to circulate.
- Removing excess moisture promptly from the property** e.g. using extractor fans in kitchens and bathrooms, opening bedroom windows for 5-10 mins after getting up, and using a dehumidifier.
- Keeping the property adequately heated.** It usually helps to have a low background temperature of at least 15 degrees in all rooms.

The following resources may be useful for tenants experiencing damp and mould issues:

1. Shelter: [damp and mould in rented homes](#)
2. Citizen's advice: [damp repairs](#)
3. NHS: [health effects of cold and damp](#)

5. References

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