

How to stop the spores

Higher energy bills may lead to a rise in damp homes — but there are simple steps you can take to minimise mould, says *Melissa York*

The mould months are upon us again. Every autumn and winter, damp is a threat to our homes, resulting in the dreaded black spots. This winter though, we face a potential condensation crisis.

The energy price cap is set to rise to £3,702 from April 2023, according to estimates from analysts Cornwall Insight. So households will want to avoid turning on the heating for as long as possible — if our houses are colder than usual, this increases the chance of condensation which, if left unchecked, can turn into mould. To make matters worse, windows are being kept firmly shut to keep the heat in, when good ventilation is essential to keep mould at bay.

“It’s going to go mad and you can understand why,” says Nicholas Donnithorne, UK technical services manager at Rentokil Property Care, of a potential mould outbreak. “And even if people do put two and two together and work out the consequences, are they going to turn the thermostat up? No.”

Living in close quarters with mould can lead to serious health problems. Last week a coroner heard the tragic case of Awaab Ishak, who died in December 2020, eight days after his second birthday, as a result of a severe respiratory



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ILLUSTRATION BY TONY BELL

condition caused by “prolonged exposure to mould” in his social rented home in Rochdale.

One in five properties in the UK will suffer from condensation at some point, a 2017 study by Rentokil Property Care found. There has been a 110 per cent increase in Google searches for “black mould on walls” in the last 30 days. These problems have increased since the pandemic as people have spent more time indoors; according to the British Standards Institution’s code of practice on moisture management, an average family of four will generate about 24 pints of water a day

(cooking, bathing and washing and drying clothes are the main sources).

The boom in pandemic pooches has added to the problem. Dogs can only control their temperature by panting and this often presents as condensation — for example, if they sleep in a conservatory. Dog beds can also get wet underneath when kept on a cold floor due to the heat that the pets produce; larger breeds can produce a surprising amount of heat.

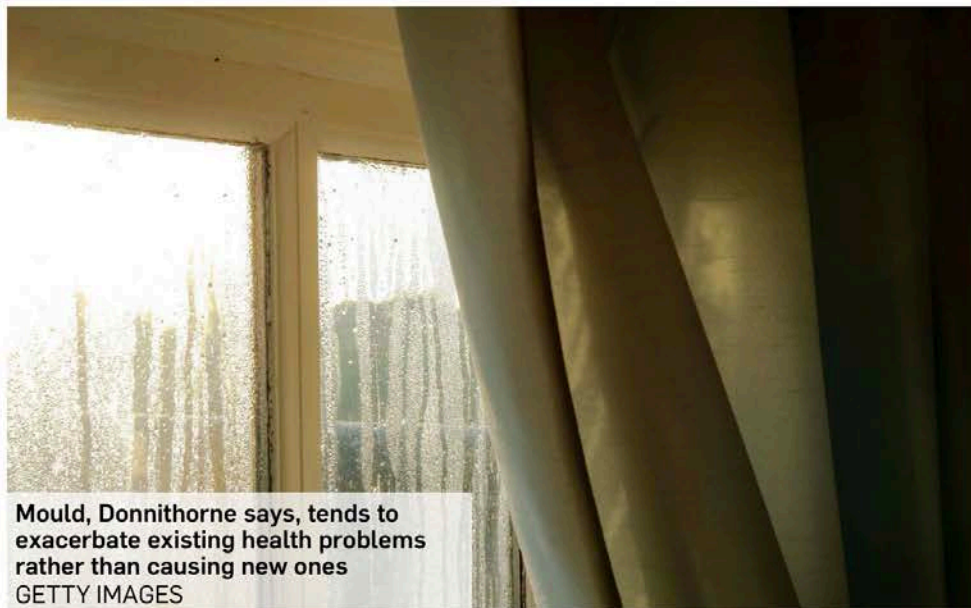
Mould grows on surfaces at “dew point”, the temperature to which the air must be cooled to become saturated with water vapour. To prevent this, relative humidity (a

measure of how much water vapour is in the air) should ideally be reduced below 70 per cent. The World Health Organisation recommends keeping rooms between 18C and 20C for the best indoor air quality.

Don't be tempted to crank up the central heating in an attempt to dry out your place, though. Dramatic temperature changes can make condensation worse, so adjust your heating gradually — a couple of degrees every half an hour.

Mark Ronald, lead engineer at Hometree, the boiler and home cover provider, says: "Energy bills are always one of a homeowner's biggest outgoings during the winter months, and while turning your heating up will contribute to higher energy usage, causing damage to your home with damp will cost you a lot more in the long run."

Mould, Donnithorne says, tends to exacerbate existing health problems rather than causing new ones. "Contrary to popular belief, mould itself generally does not cause health issues, unless you are very young, elderly or immunosuppressed." Rather, mould is a visible sign that a building is too cold and poorly ventilated. These conditions can lead to outbreaks of dust mites and it is their faeces that contains allergens that can affect people's health, in particular asthmatics. Lack of ventilation can also cause unpleasant odours and the



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build-up of volatile organic compounds from the use of cleaning and beauty products — even scented candles can be a culprit.

"No insulation without ventilation" is the mantra in the building regulation industry. As more people seek to retrofit older properties, by blocking up fireplaces and installing loft insulation, for example, they often seal them up with no ventilation. This leads to condensation. Make sure that all blocked fireplaces have a ventilation grill at the bottom and that loft insulation isn't stuffed into the eaves.

As with most things, prevention is better than cure. Simple things you can do to combat condensation in the home are to open windows and vents regularly, turn extractor fans on while showering and cooking, cover pots with lids, and avoid drying clothes on radiators or in enclosed areas. Keep

furniture away from cold walls to make sure air is able to circulate, shut the door behind you after a bath or shower, and wring out cloths in the sink when removing condensation to make sure you're not releasing moisture back into the air.

Dehumidifiers mostly mask the problem, Donnithorne says, but ventilation units are good at circulating fresh air throughout the house to reduce the chance of mould growing.

House plants can help too. "How good a plant is at reducing humidity is all to do with its ability to absorb dew, fog and other moisture through its leaves," says Chris Bonnett, owner of the online retailer Gardening Express. "This moisture then moves down to its roots. You will notice an improvement — and you'll have beautiful plants to enjoy too." He recommends English ivy, peace lilies,

palms, Boston ferns, snake plants, orchids and spider plants.

Follow this advice and it won't be damp getting you down this winter.

Need to know

If you're a private tenant in England, the landlord has a responsibility under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System to ensure the property is free from damp and condensation. Similar protections apply in Scotland under the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and in Wales under the Renting Homes (Wales) Act and the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

In England, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 gives renters the right to take their landlord to court; again, similar rules apply in Scotland and Wales. An October 2021 report by the Housing Ombudsman into issues with damp and mould stated that it is no longer acceptable to blame such conditions on a tenant's lifestyle and that all parties need to work together to find the primary cause.

How to get rid of mould

● The best way to combat mould is to locate the source. Ensure the area is well ventilated during and after treatment. Don PPE: gloves and a face mask to prevent the inhalation of spores.

● Most commercial mould-busters contain bleach, which will only kill mould on non-porous surfaces such as tiles and PVC window frames. The Mumsnet-approved favourite in this instance is HG Mould Spray (£5, [Wickes](#)). Use a microfibre cloth to wipe off mould; frequently rinse the dirty cloth in a separate container of clean water to prevent spreading.

● On porous surfaces such as paint and plaster, bleach appears effective but will only wipe away the surface growth and not the root-like hyphae, which means mould will come back while the damp problem persists. Use a product containing fungicide for longer-term protection, such as Polycell's 3-in-1 mould killer (£7, [Wilko](#)

) or harness the power of vinegar to make your own DIY mould killer. Pour half a cup each of white vinegar and distilled water into an empty spray bottle and add five drops of tea tree essential oil and ten drops of clove oil. Shake well and spray onto affected areas. Leave to dry for an hour minimum, repeating application if necessary.

● Once mould has been removed from painted areas, sand off any flaking paint before applying a product such as Ronseal's problem wall anti-mould paint (£40 for 2.5 litres, [B&Q](#)). If you simply paint over the mould with regular paint, it will reappear without proper remediation. Another option is Suretherm's Goodbye Mould Thermal Anti Condensation Paint (£23 for 2.5 litres, [rawlinspaints.com](#)) which forms a thermal barrier to reduce condensation and thus mould.

● Still an issue? Call in the professionals.

Victoria Brzezinski ■