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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## IS THAT...MOLD?!?!

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

For many who work in museums and care for museum collections the idea of finding mold is a recurring nightmare. However, like most things that keep us up at night, knowledge provides power. And it is important to know about mold because it is nearly inevitable that mold spores (hopefully inactive ones!) lurk somewhere in your museum and its collection.

Thinking about how to deal with a mold outbreak in the collection before it happens will help if the time comes. This plan should be part of your emergency plan and should address how to physically deal with the mold, as well as ideas of how to financially deal with it. Proper mold remediation takes money, so keeping a list of possible foundations, emergency grant lines, and so forth that might help offset that cost can also help eliminate some of the stress caused by an outbreak. And do not forget to check with your insurance company to see if and how they can help with mold issues.



[Governor Schricker and Kraft Cheese.](#) (Larry Foster Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

When it comes to mold, it is important to remember that any type of

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### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Fungus Among Us:  
Mold Growth in  
Museum  
Environments](#)  
(Alaska State  
Museums)

[Mold Course](#)  
(United States  
Environmental  
Protection  
Agency)

[Mold: Prevention  
Of Growth In  
Museum  
Collections](#)  
(National Park  
Service Conserve  
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### TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Mold!](#)  
**Recorded -**  
Connecting to  
Collections Care  
webinar.

[Affordable and  
Transportable:  
Creating and  
Circulating  
Compact Traveling  
Exhibitions](#)  
**Oct. 6 -**  
Connecting to  
Collections Care  
webinar.

[Digitization 201:  
Fundraising for  
Digitization](#)  
**Oct. 6 -**  
Conservation  
Center for Art and

mold can be toxic, especially to individuals who are sensitive to it. Unfortunately, people may not know if they are particularly sensitive to mold until they are exposed to it, so it is important to take every precaution around mold. When dealing with mold, or potential mold, situations make sure to ALWAYS wear a mask (in this situation an N95/N100 or a full respirator is best...once mold gets into your lungs it stays there). Wearing gloves, unvented goggles, and protective clothing (usually in the form of a disposable Tyvek suit) is also a good idea. It might seem like overkill, but when dealing with mold nothing is overkill.

There are a few things that can help you know if you are in for a possible mold situation. One is changes in environmental factors that make the environment more hospitable to mold activation and growth. Excess moisture, high relative humidity, and a high dew point can all contribute to mold growth. By avoiding damp areas for collections storage, having proper air circulation around objects (do not let things stack up and sit directly against walls), and responding quickly to water emergencies, you can lower your risk of mold activation. Do your best to keep the relative humidity between 40 percent and 50 percent, which is ideal, but it should certainly stay below 65 percent.



[Brown Grocery After the Flood, Indianapolis, 1913.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Other ways to prevent mold include regularly changing air filters to reduce the potential that trapped mold spores re-enter the environment. Also, keep areas as dust free as possible because dust can contain dormant mold spores. When cleaning make sure to use disposable static rags and vacuums with HEPA filters to trap mold spores. Additionally, objects made of organic materials should be kept out of damp areas and places with little or no air movement as these places create perfect mold-loving microenvironments.

Mold leaves more than just unsightly stains. Mold spores eat organic material and can cause permanent damage. It is important to get rid of both active and inactive mold spores because inactive mold just means it does not currently have the perfect environment to jump to life. The difference can be detected by the mold's characteristics. Active mold generally looks fluffy and is squishy and spongy in texture, while inactive mold is dry, dusty and powdery. Knowing which you are dealing with can help you know if you need to act immediately (mold proliferates quickly!), or if you can monitor the situation while you make a plan.



[Washing Jars.](#) (American Red Cross, Indianapolis Chapter, Indiana Historical Society)

If you suspect your museum has a mold outbreak, there are four steps outlined by Tara Kennedy in the Connecting To Collections Care webinar, [MOLD!](#) Those steps are:

1. Confine the outbreak.
2. Stop the growth of the mold.
3. Kill the active mold growth.
4. Take steps to prevent re-infestation.

In summary the advice is to quarantine the area containing the outbreak and call a professional. They will help guide you through what you need to do. While you might be able to call a local mold remediation company to assist with the containment of the outbreak and cleaning up the non-collection items (walls, doors and storage furnishings), remember, they do not necessarily have the proper training in how to clean and deal with mold on collection objects. If they do not, it is best to reach out to a conservator to get some suggestions of what to do next with the collection items. This is one of the reasons it can be so helpful to determine these things prior to a mold outbreak because you will know exactly who you need to call and for what.

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[Local History Services](#)

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