

# Disaster Area Volunteers

## Don't Become a Victim of Mold Exposure

The first step in making a successful contribution to a Disaster Relief Team is to identify in what manner you can safely assist without putting your health at undue risk. It's not a matter of whether or not to volunteer—by all means volunteer—just determine the volunteer position best suited for you.

### Tips to Preserve Your Health While Volunteering

**TIP #1:** The CDC has identified certain population groups that may be more adversely affected by mold exposures than most healthy adults. These high-risk individuals are NOT good candidates to volunteer in the disaster area itself. The CDC's high-risk groups for mold exposure include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Infants and children
- Elderly people
- Pregnant women
- People with respiratory conditions, such as allergies, asthma or COPD
- People who are immune-compromised or who have weakened immune systems
- People who have undergone recent major surgery
- People who take immune-suppressing medication, including oral or nasal steroids

**TIP #2:** People not in high-risk groups may be good candidates to volunteer in disaster areas, provided they understand the importance of properly using personal protection equipment (PPE). Disaster areas are breeding grounds for biological contaminants, such as molds and bacteria, and often have elevated levels of chemicals.

**TIP #3:** The CDC recommends use of an N95 respirator (a disposable mask) for mold cleanup. It states that the N95 can give some protection from airborne dust and mold. However, the CDC also states that the N95 is only approved for dust. Further-

more, published, peer-reviewed scientific studies show that microscopic intact spores penetrate through to the inside of the N95 respirators. Studies indicate that at least 10x more protection is provided by the elastomeric respirators, which have reusable half or full facemasks with disposable cartridges.

Some level of mask penetration still occurs. For this reason, it is important to adequately ventilate indoor spaces, especially when performing mold removal which increases airborne levels of mold and contaminants. Since exposure can also occur through the skin and eyes, experts recommend wearing disposable Tyvek suits over personal clothing, nitrile gloves and safety glasses. Most importantly, before leaving home to volunteer in a disaster area, try on an elastomeric respirator designated for use in a mold-contaminated environment. If you have difficulty breathing while wearing it, consult your doctor regarding any possible medical restrictions in your volunteer work.

**TIP #4:** The CDC documents that it is not necessary to use PPE when collecting belongings out of a mold-contaminated structure or when performing basic cleanup. However, scientific and medical experts recommend wearing PPE even under these limited circumstances.

**TIP #5:** To reduce the effects of mold and chemical exposures while volunteering in a disaster area, create a “clean” sleeping room by using a properly sized air purifier equipped with a HEPA-grade filter. Use of an air purifier in your sleeping room will significantly reduce the level of airborne contaminants that you inhale during your sleep hours and will give your body an opportunity to recover and repair from exposures that occurred during the day.

**TIP #6:** Adverse health effects of mold exposures can exceed temporary health effects such as environmentally induced allergies and asthma. Efforts to reduce mold exposures by taking adequate preventative measures to preserve your health while volunteering in a disaster area are critical. Exposure to concentrated levels of mold in indoor environments can be severely harmful to your health.

The main fungal organisms that grow in water-damaged buildings are *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, and *Stachybotrys*. Inhaling high levels of these fungal spores can cause even healthy people to develop respiratory disease. Furthermore, these species of molds known to grow on wet-building materials produce poisons called mycotoxins. They can enter the body through the skin and airways when spores and dust particles are inhaled. Exposure to large amounts of these mold poisons can reduce the immune system and cause systemic health problems in even a healthy person.

**TIP #7:** Use correctly fitting PPE when cleaning or remediating structural mold—even if other volunteers or area residents are not. Be a good role model. Help spread the word about the importance of using PPE. It is a safeguard that should not be

sidestepped.

The information in this brochure is adapted from the book *MOLD: The War Within, Lessons Learned from Katrina*, which details the health effects of and treatments

**Disaster Area Volunteers are heroes to affected-area residents and play vital roles in rebuilding damaged communities. We must keep our heroes healthy.**

for mold and chemical exposures. The authors, Kurt and Lee Ann Billings, and their family became seriously ill from mold and chemical exposures after Hurricane Katrina. Now recovered, they have partnered with the National Organization of Remediators and Mold Inspectors ([www.NORMI.org](http://www.NORMI.org)) to make available educational brochures to disaster area residents and volunteers in the effort to reduce illness.

NORMI is a certifying agency involved in training and certifying mold and indoor environmental professionals since 2004. This brochure is available to share in both a pdf and a printable version. Download this free resource at the below link: [www.NORMIProETF.org](http://www.NORMIProETF.org)

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