

Toxic Intruder Has Families Fleeing Homes

ABC News

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November 26, 2002, 8:42 AM

Nov. 29 -- Believe it or not, families around the country are fleeing their homes — or having them destroyed — because of an insidious intruder they say is making them sick.

The invader? Black mold. Its technical name is *Stachybotrys chartarum* — stachy for short — and it's got a lot of people panicked.

In Oregon, the O'Hara family asked their local fire department to burn their \$450,000 home to the ground after black mold was found inside. "It's basically just a house that poisoned my family," Mark O'Hara said.

In Hawaii, a \$95 million Hilton Hotel tower has been closed since July because black mold was found in some of the rooms.

In a July 2001 story Time magazine said toxic mold is spreading "like some sort of biblical plague." The New York Daily News called it "killer mold."

Whatever you call it, across the country, black mold is causing people to abandon buildings, close schools and leave beautiful homes sitting vacant.

In Seabrook, Texas, the Hammond family lived in tents in their backyard for almost nine months, waiting for their insurance company to settle their claim and clean up black mold they say they discovered in their home.

Beverly and Mike Hammond say a bathroom leak caused the black mold to grow. The Hammonds lived for months with a "potty tent" that served as an outhouse. "As soon as I saw the mold, then we, you know, hightailed it for the tent," Beverly Hammond said.

They say the mold made them sick, causing fatigue and joint pain, and will only go in their house with a respirator.

Texas Dream House Turned 'Toxic Tara'

Melinda Ballard's mansion near Austin, Texas is considered by many to be the "ground zero" of the current mold hysteria. Like Diane Fortner, Ballard once thought of her estate as a dream home. Ballard now refers to it as "Toxic Tara."

Ballard says it all began with a leaky roof and some burst pipes. She claims her insurance company lied to her, delaying her request to have the wet materials in her home replaced. That's when she says the black mold began to grow under the kitchen floorboards and spread to other areas. Finally, she and her family left.