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Know What's Causing Your Congestion? It Might Be Right in Front of You

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By Owen Baker

As you begin to turn off fans, close windows, and toast in your rooms from the heating, is Sudafed becoming your main medicine? We seem to be consistently congested in the fall and winter months of our Denison careers. We brush it off, saying it was because of “frat flu” or COVID—but it persists. For over a year now, I’ve been trying to put my finger on it. Is it my immune system? The difference in Ohio weather to the UK?

Last Big Red Weekend, my girlfriend’s mum saw some of the vents in dorms and building lobbies. And as a heating and air-conditioning specialist, she was a little surprised to notice that they “weren’t too recently” changed. She even mentioned that the vent filters throughout buildings and dorms should really be changed every 1-2 months in schools, and 1-3 months in homes. In my room, and across campus, it’s clear they’re a little beyond that point.

Filters being unchanged for a long time leads to moisture buildup, and then black mould growth in the vent filters (especially in bathrooms and by showers). Without being too sciencey, the air being pushed out by the vents then picks up the mould, traps it in the air, and then becomes what we breathe. The same principle applies to leaving surfaces damp for long periods of time. This can lead to mould growth on those surfaces, especially in corners and crevices.

And after conversations with a few friends and classmates, it seems I’m not the only one. Some report black mould by their showers and in their sinks. And the scary thing is—at first, we didn’t notice it was mould.

Why *should* mould and its removal be taken seriously?

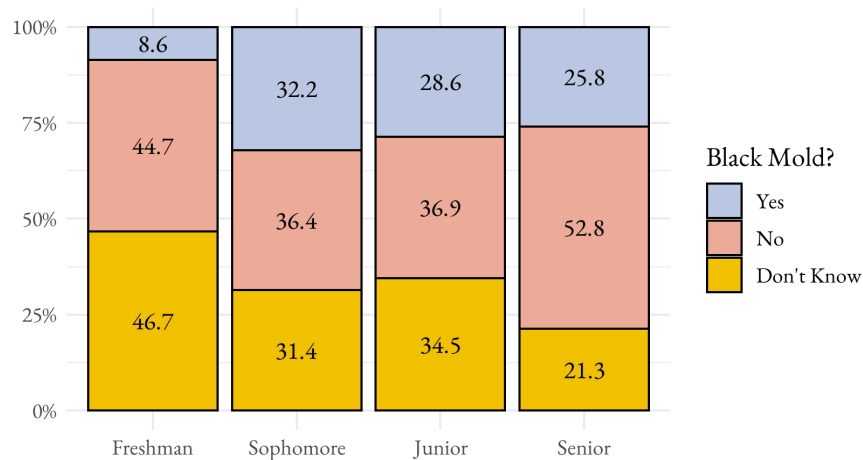
The US Department of Energy (DoE) performed a meta-analysis of 33 peer-reviewed studies, delving into the public health and economic impacts of mould and dampness in homes. They found that, for both the economy and for public health, they pose “significant risks in the US”—estimating the national cost of asthma from mould and dampness in homes to be \$3.5 billion. Mould exposure also accounts for 21% (with 95% confidence) of all current asthma cases across the country, and may increase the risk of respiratory issues. It’s a problem, and it’s alarmingly overlooked by lots of people.

Why does Denison need to acknowledge the presence of it?

For a start—because it exists! Our February 2023 survey asked a brand new question; “Do you see black mould in your living spaces (dorms, bathrooms)?” We also gave our participants a “Maybe, I dunno” button, just in case they were struggling with identifying it. Black mould usually looks like black circles, clumps of black circles, or weirdly shaped black stains (also, it usually appears near or in sinks, on the floor by showers, and by windows, if that encourages you to look further in your dorm).

Our survey discovered that mould was definitely an existing problem with everyone but first-years, who are more likely to say they’re not sure what it looks like. Overall, this equates to 22% saying “Yes”, 43% saying “No”, and 35% saying “Maybe – I don’t know what that looks like.”

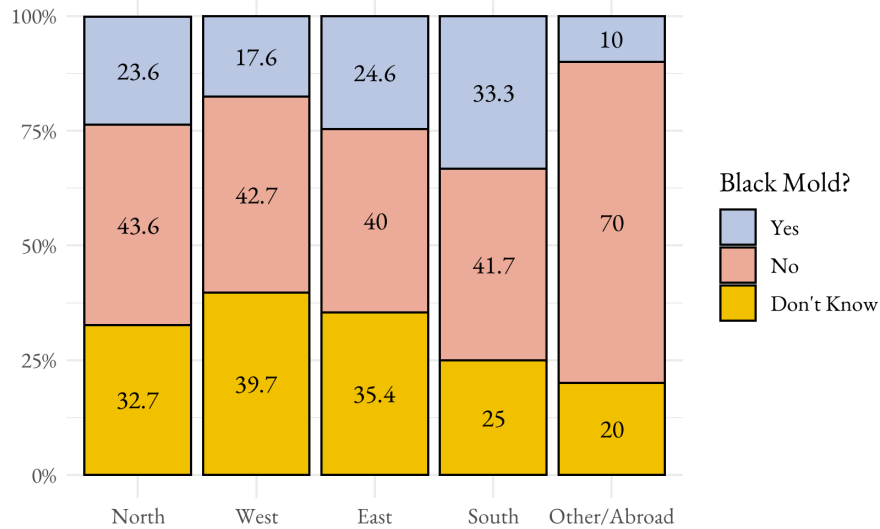
The Presence of Black Mold by Class Year



Despite the high rates of “I dunno’ across first-years, the 17% difference in mould prevalence between these first-years and the rest isn’t something to ignore; Crawford, Shorney and Smith were all newly-renovated at the beginning of last year, which could also be a contributing factor to why the rates are lower.

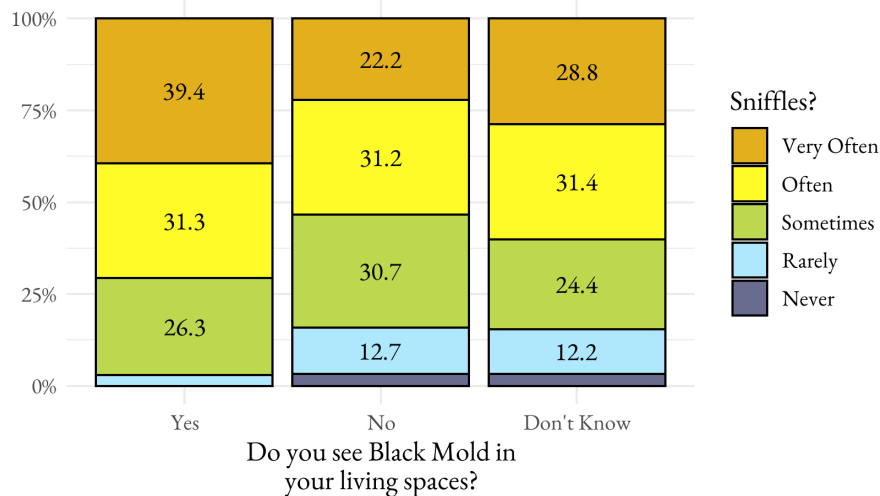
Another element we wanted to break down was the distribution of mould per quad. South and East mostly have unrenovated buildings, with bathrooms within dorms, as opposed to the “Freshman West”, which are mostly doubles. So it’s interesting to see that reporting mould is a bit higher on South and East quads, though is certainly evident across campus, which suggests that mould is as much about *how* we live as where we live.

The Perceived Presence of Black Mold by Quad



Another brand new question on the survey; we also asked how often respondents have been feeling congested this year. The data below suggests that students' congestion indeed increases with mould presence—fully 70% of those who reported seeing mould said they were *often* or *very often* nasally congested so far this year. Compare that rate to the 53% of those who reported they don't see any mould. Of course we can't make a causal connection between the two, but it highly suggests that the two are linked.

The Presence of Black Mold is Linked to Congestion



In 2016, The Denisonian published about a student who reported mould and mushrooms growing in their Sunnies bathroom to maintenance facilities, who then fixed the problem. If there was one case 6 years ago that was reported, there's a possibility that there are more unreported cases that we might not ever hear about. It's rare to hear about mould, perhaps because we don't care, don't know enough about it to report, or don't want the maintenance worker going through our stuff.

What can the university do to help us eliminate mould?

First, it would make sense to have a better communication channel between maintenance facilities and students—how can the issue be fixed if we don't know what to look for? Just like those Campus Safety emails about *out-of-dorm* campus issues, it may be useful to receive the same information and regular reminders about *in-dorm* issues that pose a risk, such as mould, improper ventilation, and cleaning (for those who need it).

Second, vent filters need regular and transparent maintenance. We're currently unaware of how often our vent filters are examined; it has to be no more often than Thanksgiving, Winter break, and Spring break (if and when they perform inspections), otherwise we would all be aware of the regular entrance of maintenance workers into our dorms.

Of course we can't be certain that mould is the sole reason for our congestion either. Denison increased their campus cleaning efforts during the pandemic, and many students were also given free air purifiers for their dorms last year to help with air quality. Facilities may also be aware of the mould issue; they see our dorms firsthand during those inspections, but may not be given the budget to keep up the maintenance to their ideal standards. It could also have to do with some students just not cleaning their living spaces adequately, which I would like to exclude myself from.

Transparency is the denominator that remains. We have to be more transparent with facilities about the issue, and hopefully, if it's reported enough, then the finances can step in and help with our air quality. But a direct channel of communication is necessary for both ways regardless. Without that, we're left with dorm cleaning techniques and reporting to maintenance facilities when we see a problem. But, the first step is to just take a look.

Owen Baker is a sophomore cinema major and journalism minor from the UK. He is a Hilltopper and is Vice President of the new Denison F1 Club (which he really wants you to check out).