



NEWS RELEASE

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Molds on Food: Are They Dangerous?

Some molds cause allergic reactions and respiratory problems. And a few molds, in the right conditions produce “mycotoxins,” poisonous substances that can make people sick. When you see mold on food, it is safe to cut off the moldy part and use the rest? To find the answer to that question, delve beneath the surface of food to where molds take root.

Molds are microscopic fungi that live on plant or animal matter. No one knows how many species of fungi exist, but estimates range from tens of thousands to perhaps 300,000 or more. Most are filamentous (threadlike) organisms and the production of spores is characteristic of fungi in general. These spores can be transported by air, water, or insects.

Unlike bacteria that are one-cell, molds are made of many cells and can sometimes be seen with the naked eye. Under a microscope, they look like skinny mushrooms. In many molds, the body consists of:

- Root threads that invade the food it lives on,
- A stalk rising above the food, and
- Spores that form at the end of the stalks.

The spores give the mold the color you see. When airborne, the spores spread the mold from place to place like dandelion seeds blowing across a meadow.

Molds have branches and roots that are like very thin threads. The roots may be difficult to see when the mold is growing on food and may be very deep in the food. Foods that are moldy may also have invisible bacteria growing along with the mold.

Mycotoxins, the poisonous substances produced by certain molds found primarily in grain and nut crops but are also known to be on celery, grapes juice, apples and other produce.

Some molds can be beneficial. Molds are used to make certain kinds of cheeses and can be on the surface of cheese or can be developed internally. Blue veined cheeses such as Roquefort are created by the introduction of *Penicillium roqueforti* spores. Cheeses such as Brie and Camembert have white surface molds. The molds used to manufacture these cheeses are safe to eat.

Cleanliness is vital in controlling mold. Mold spores from affected food can build up in your refrigerator, dishcloths, and other cleaning utensils.

- Clean the inside of the refrigerator every few months with 1 tablespoon of baking soda dissolved in a quart of water. Rinse with clear water and dry. Scrub visible mold (usually black) on rubber casings using 1 tablespoon of bleach in a quart of water.
- Keep dishcloths, towels, sponges and mops clean and fresh. A musty smell means they’re spreading mold around. Discard items you can’t clean or launder.

You can find additional information of molds at www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/mold.htm or contact your local Cooperative Extension Office.

Referenced from Margaret Johns, UCCE Kern County. Source: Food Safety Focus, April 2002. USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, Molds On Food: Are They Dangerous. www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/mold.htm