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NF91-17 How to Minimize Mildew Damage to Clothing

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How to Minimize Mildew Damage to Clothing

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Mildew can be a problem in many homes. It is destructive and creates an unpleasant musty odor. This fungus growth ranges in color from black to gray or white and is produced by molds that attach to any surface. Molds that cause mildew are always in the air, but to flourish, they need moisture to grow. Poor circulation also helps their cause.

Clothes and linens stored when damp and/or dirty are ideal environments for mildew growth. Molds develop most often on cotton, linen, rayon, silk, leather, wood and paper. Many synthetic fibers are generally resistant to mildew. However, if these fabrics are stored in a soiled condition in a warm, damp place, they too can be attacked by mildew.

Effect of Mildew on Fabrics

When mildew starts to grow on fabric, it interlaces around the yarns, and eventually grows into individual fibers. It looks like dark, irregularly shaped stains. The fabric takes on a musty odor, and as it grows, the fibers eventually deteriorate and rot. If mildew is allowed to grow for too long, the fibers may be irreparably damaged.

Mildew Prevention

Prevention of mildew is the best solution. Keep closets, dresser drawers, basements — any place where mildew is likely to grow — as clean as possible. Soil on dirty articles can supply enough food for mildew to start growing when moisture and temperature are right.

Clean clothing is less likely to mildew than soiled clothing. Generally, most synthetic fibers, such as acetate, acrylic, polyester, and nylon, resist mildew. However, even on these fabrics, soil may supply food to start mildew. Clean all soiled fabrics thoroughly, regardless of fiber type to help prevent them from mildewing.

Do not let clothing and other fabric articles lie around damp or wet. Dry soiled clothes before putting them into the hamper.

Dry washed garments and fabric thoroughly and quickly. Fabrics left in the washer may get sour and musty smelling — a sign of mold growth.

Control the Cause of Mildew

Cool air holds less moisture than warm air. Air-conditioning systems remove moisture from the air by taking up warm air, cooling it and circulating the cool, dry air back into the room. Dehumidifiers are often used in basements. A humidistat can be attached to the unit to control the humidity.

Excessive moisture in basements may indicate cracked or defective mortar which needs replacing. Concrete may need to be waterproofed and outside drainage adequate.

Removing Mildew

Remove mildew spots from clothing as soon as you discover them. Brush off mold outdoors so mildew spores do not scatter in the house. Sun and air fabrics thoroughly. If mildew spots remain, pretreat them by rubbing detergent into the dampened stain. Launder the items in hot water and chlorine bleach, if safe for fabric, and detergent. Rinse well and dry in the sun. If any stain remains, use lemon juice and salt. Again spread in the sun to bleach. Rinse thoroughly. Chlorine bleach is effective in killing the mildew growth and eliminating the staining. However, it cannot be used on silk, wool or nylon.

Sodium perborate and hydrogen peroxide are mild oxidizing bleaches. Use sodium perborate if the garment contains silk, wool or nylon. However, it is not safe for white silk and wool. Hydrogen peroxide is safe on all fibers and most colors, but be sure to test for colorfastness. Because these bleaches are mild, they are not very effective in removing mildew stains and will not actually kill the fungus.

Take non-washables to the drycleaner; identify the stain.

Remove mildew from leather foods by wiping the surface with diluted alcohol (l cup denatured or rubbing alcohol to l cup water). Dry in a current of air; use a fan for better circulation. If mildew remains, wash with saddle soap, or a soap containing a germicide or fungicide. Wipe with a damp cloth and dry in an airy place. Polish leather shoes and luggage with a good wax dressing.

Store Items With a Mildew Inhibitor

Certain chemicals that give off vapors which inhibit mold growth may be use to protect stored clothing. The chemical, paradichlorobenzene, effectively controls mildew on clothing and other apparel when used in packages, trunks, or garment bags kept as nearly airtight as possible. Scatter the crystals through the folds of garments, or hang bags of crystals at the top of fabric garment bags so the heavy vapors settle on the materials being protected. Use one pound of crystals for 100 cubic feet. A closet 3 feet deep by 4 feet wide by 8 feet high has 96 cubic feet of air space. Adjust the amount needed proportionately. Use moth crystals only for temporary measures as long term use can react with materials.

Paradichlorobenzene damages some plastics. Remove plastic buttons and ornaments from garments and use wooden or metal hangers instead of plastic clothes hangers.

Another chemical, paraformaldehyde, has mildew-inhibiting properties. Use it to protect stored clothing. Place bags of the chemical where the vapors can circulate and reach all surfaces of the stored articles. A mixture of 3.15 ounces of paraformaldehyde and 0.35 ounces of paradichlorobenzene can be used for every 500 cubic feet of airspace. A 9 x 10 ft. room, 8 ft. high contains 720 cubic feet of airspace.

Low-pressure sprays containing mildew-inhibiting chemicals will also help control molds and mildew growth in a closed area. The spray must wet the interior surfaces of the closet or storage container in order to be effective. Respray as frequently as necessary.

Do not inhale the mist from the spray. Read pesticide labels carefully.

Use of Pesticides

Pesticide use is governed by a Federal law that is administered by the Environmental Protection Agency. This law requires manufacturers to register pesticides, and makes it illegal for people to use them except in accordance with the instructions on the label.

When used as directed, pesticides are safe and effective; used improperly, they can injure humans, animals and plants. Be cautious and read, and follow all directions, precautions and ways of disposal on pesticide labels.

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