Untreated damage will result in mold infestation

Hurricane Sandy left many ugly reminders of her unwelcome visit to the Jersey Shore: docks and decks ripped away from bay-front homes, damaged appliances and destroyed possessions, and the residue of toxic flood water on roads, sidewalks and lawns.

But the ugliest reminder is one just beginning to appear.

It can't be seen from the street, the way piles of soaked carpeting, sodden mattresses and ruined keepsakes can. Even when you can see it, experts say, it's more of a nuisance than a menace, as long as it's remediated promptly and properly.

What is it? It's mold, a four-letter word with which many Jersey Shore property owners are about to become unhappily acquainted.

"The biggest danger is not mold you can see, but what you can't see in the walls," said Justin Isabell, a project manager with Servpro, a nationwide franchise that specializes in treating fire and water damage. Servpro's lime-green vehicles are visible all over the shoreline, including at Peck's Beach Village in Ocean City, a neighborhood of low-income housing units that Monday began a three-month remediation and restoration project necessitated by the black water, or Category 3, flooding caused by Hurricane Sandy.

"Mold will grow in three days, that's the incubation period," Isabell said. "In seven days, you can see mold on the underside of things."

Residents of most resort towns, having left when the state issued a mandatory evacuation order, were prevented from accessing the barrier islands for at least 48 hours after the storm. That put them in an immediate race with the clock to get ahead of a mold infestation once they returned and assessed the extent of the flooding their homes had endured.

“If you got the water pumped out right away and cut out the water-damaged sheet-rock and insulation, you may get away with no mold,” said Marylee Morinelli-Stace, owner of Coastal Environmental Compliance in Hammonton. “In 72 hours, mold can start to grow. In one week, you may see it. In another week, you’ll see it for sure.”

You’ve got mold

With the one-week anniversary of Sandy’s Oct. 29 landfall having passed, homeowners who have not removed flood-inundated carpeting, padding and drywall – and allowed the affected areas to dry – must assume their homes are infested with mold, the experts said. In Cape May County, where 47 percent of the housing is classified as second homes and many properties are vacant at this time of year, absentee owners are facing the greatest threat and expense posed by mold.

“The longer it’s left untreated, the worse the mold gets, the more it costs to remove,” Isabell said. “People may get sticker shock to find it costs $10,000 to rip and dry a house, but it will cost two or three times that if you wait until spring.”

“If people are not coming back until spring, they’re going to have a big mold problem,” said Morinelli-Stace, mentioning stachybotrys as “one of the worst molds we see in buildings that have been flooded” because of toxins in the mold spores.

Exposure to mold, including the inhalation of spores, can result in respiratory complications, headaches, fever, chronic coughing and allergic reactions.

Cold weather will not stop the growth of mold, the experts said, so property owners cannot depend upon winter to buy them time before they make necessary repairs.

“It’ll keep on growing as long as there is moisture,” Morinelli-Stace said. “It may not grow as rapidly, but it will grow.”

“You get three days at 70 degrees in a house that’s been closed up, come March, April or May, those spores that have just been sitting there are going to explode,” Isabell said.

Because the county takes its lead from the state, and the state does not regulate the treatment of mold in private dwellings, there are no county regulations, said Kevin Thomas, public health coordinator for the county Department of Health. Calling mold “a public health nuisance,” he said, “The county recommendation is to clean, remediate and restore quickly because mold historically has health concerns associated with it.”

Absentee owners

Also, at the municipal level, there is no “obligation or responsibility to notify the homeowners” of damage from the hurricane, said Frank Donato, coordinator of emergency management in Ocean City, where 72 percent – or three out of four -- of the island’s homes are vacant 10 months of the year.

To give an example of how absentee owners can complicate the public health picture, consider Oxford Lane, a street in a single-family home, residential neighborhood in the south end of Ocean City, where eight of 40 homes (20 percent) had not been visited one week after Sandy deposited anywhere from 4 to 24 inches of water in those homes.

Ultimately, officials said, it is incumbent upon the owner to check up on his property.

“I find that oftentimes a neighbor is the best resource to have information as to how to contact

the owner at their primary residence," Donato said. "Once the property is visited and opened up, however, then certainly the city and/or the county health department can step in and have oversight depending on what the conditions are."

"The logical thing to do with those people who haven't showed up yet is to send them a letter," Thomas said, noting all municipalities have access to property owners' mailing addresses through their tax offices.

"Years ago, nobody even talked about mold," said Diane Wieland, director of the county's Department of Tourism. "Now it's the top issue."

She said her son, a mold remediation specialist, told her that insurance adjusters are encouraging his company "to do what you have to do."

"They say it's better to do it now," she said of repairing flood damage. "You don't want to have to do it later."

Landlord-tenant issues

Wieland also said she has received some complaints from renters that their landlords are refusing to repair flood damage from Sandy. "They're saying if it's not habitable, they're going to tear it down," she said.

Morinelli-Stace said she is occasionally contacted by renters to test a unit for a mold infestation and to provide evidence in court cases that the mold poses a health problem.

"I have the feeling we'll be seeing a lot of landlord-tenant issues from this," Morinelli-Stace said. "When they have to be settled through legal channels, it becomes a money issue, a time issue and a health issue. If there's mold from this flood, and there will be, people may have to bring in the county health department."

Mold infestations can lead to demolitions when wood is so water-logged it becomes soft and compromises buildings from a structural standpoint, the experts said. That could result in the release of mold spores into the air when a flood-damaged home is opened up after months of being sealed up.

Whether mold convinces property owners to tear down rather than remediate, or wind and waves destroyed structures that are located in zones where rebuilding is subject to strict regulations, Wieland said Sandy will have a lasting impact on the shore.

“This,” she said, “will change the whole face of housing down here.”

What is black water and who has it?

The Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC) classifies water damage into three categories.

Category 1, also called clean water, comes from such sources as overflowing tubs and sinks or malfunctioning appliances. Category 2, or gray water, contains chemicals and other contaminants and can cause illness through exposure and consumption. Category 3, or black water, is unsanitary and potentially infectious, originating from such sources as sewage, seawater and standing water, and most commonly caused by hurricanes such as Sandy.

Hepatitis A, adenoviruses, enteroviruses and rotavirus are among the viruses found in Category 3 black water, along with parasites and harmful bacteria.

As all black water presents the risk of serious illness, protective measures should be taken when encountering it. At minimum, eye protection, gloves and boots, or shoe covers, should be worn. Waterproof coveralls and respirators may also be appropriate protective equipment to use when treating damage from black water.

Rain will eventually wash the residue of black water from Hurricane Sandy off the roads, sidewalks and lawns into the soil, said Marylee Morinelli-Stace, the owner of Coastal Environmental Compliance in Hammonton.