



University of California
Cooperative Extension
Tulare County

Agriculture and Natural Resources



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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, is it safe to cut off the moldy part and use the rest? To find the answer to that question, we need to look 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 threadlike and produce spores. 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.

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.

If mold is found on the following foods, they should be thrown out:

- ▶ luncheon meats, bacon, or hot dogs, cooked leftover meat and poultry
- ▶ cooked casseroles, cooked grain and pasta

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- ▶ soft cheese (such as cottage, cream cheese, Brie, Camembert, Neufchatel, chevre, Bel Paese, etc.)
- ▶ crumbled, shredded, and sliced cheeses (all types)
- ▶ yogurt and sour cream
- ▶ jams and jellies
- ▶ soft fruits and vegetables
- ▶ bread and baked goods
- ▶ peanut butter
- ▶ legumes and nuts

On the following foods, you can cut off one inch around and below the mold: hard cheese, firm fruits and vegetables (cabbage, bell peppers, carrots, etc.). Rewrap the foods with new plastic wrap. Discard the old wrapping.

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.

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

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