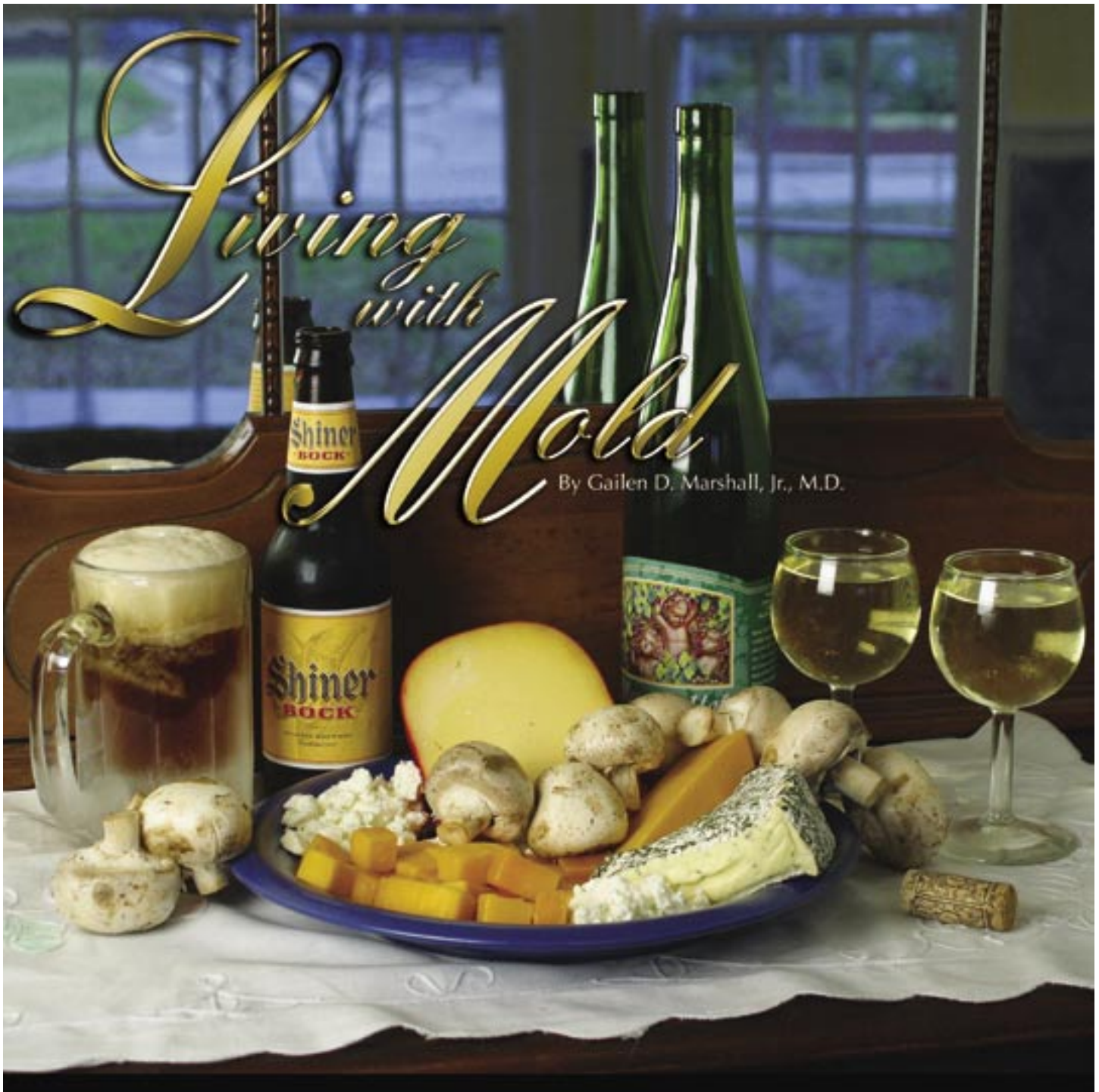


A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*



*What do these things have in common: wine, penicillin, cheese, beer and mushrooms? Stumped? Here's a big hint: it's also the latest health scare, costing Texas consumers millions of dollars in higher insurance premiums and needless home "health" testing, and it's being used as a get-rich-quick scheme by some personal injury lawyers. Right. It's mold.*

So how did this common type of fungus, present in all sorts of good things used daily and ever-present in the environment, grow into the major consumer crisis it has become today?

As a board certified allergist-immunologist, I have taught, done research and seen patients with a variety of immune-based medical conditions for 14 years. In the past several years, I have seen an increasing number of frightened, sometimes angry, patients who believe, or have been told, that they have "toxic mold disease." But do they?

There are many different kinds of mold — at least 10,000 common types. Mold is everywhere because it requires only a source of water, sugar, oxygen and a friendly surface on which to thrive. In high-humidity environments like Texas, mold is especially abundant. It is not possible to completely rid the environment of mold, nor would there be any reason to do so.

Is mold harmful to people? Can it cause memory loss, fatigue or brain damage? For most people, the answer is a resounding and hopefully reassuring, "No." The world is filled with mold spores. They are breathed in the air, eaten in foods and drunk in our water every day with no ill effects. Some people develop allergies and experience symptoms of asthma or hay fever when exposed to certain mold spores. There are a few mold-related diseases that can be serious, mostly in people with severely depressed immune systems (such as advanced cancer or AIDS). Fortunately, these are extremely rare cases.

What about the "experts" who diagnose mold-related memory loss or learning disabilities? There is absolutely no proof to support these claims. And what about the dreaded "toxic" mold? The term itself seems to have been manufactured to arouse panic and fear among otherwise calm people.

Even though health risks may be vastly exaggerated, most people would rather not have excess, visible mold in their homes. Mold looks bad and has an unpleasant odor. However, mold removal is relatively simple.

Mold means moisture. Sources of excess moisture — a roof or shower leak or condensation, for example — need to be eliminated. Stop the source of water, and stop the mold. It's that simple. If expert advice is needed, find a reputable person or company trained in moisture management to find and fix the source of excess water. Often, the mold will not return once the moisture is removed.

Is it necessary to pay to have a home tested for mold? No. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the reigning mold expert from Harvard's School of Public Health do not support most home mold testing. Remember, in high-humidity places like the Texas Gulf Coast, at least some mold can be found in virtually all homes more than a couple of years old.

If mold is found, is someone to blame? Probably not. The mere presence of mold in a home or office does not automatically mean that someone has done something wrong.

Should homeowners panic? No. React to mold based on facts, not on hysteria and hype. The mold scare is already having a demonstrable and troubling effect on the Texas economy and on individual lives.

Texas insurance rates are more than double the national average and are continuing to rise based in large part on mold-related claims. Many people can no longer afford homeowners insurance, assuming they are able to get coverage in the first place. Home sales are not going through because of mold concerns; home sellers, lenders, real estate professionals, title companies and a host of other industries are being negatively affected. Eventually this will cost some Texans their jobs.

People are having their lives disrupted by testers and remediators, often for no legitimate reason. If health is the major concern, consider this. The apartment or hotel into which people relocate for weeks or months may have higher mold content than the home being remediated. And after the expensive home cleanup is completed, the same molds may still be in the air outside.

The bottom line is this: people who are ill should see a physician. If the doctor thinks the patient has mold allergies, testing by a reputable medical specialist who has the credentials to provide reliable information may be warranted. The doctor's direction for treatment should be

followed. Check the physician's credentials to determine his or her expertise in the diagnosis and management of mold-related allergic diseases. Do not be afraid to ask why he or she thinks mold is causing a problem.

Most importantly, before suing over mold exposure, consider the aggravation, expense and frustration associated with trying to be compensated for one of the everyday risks of living on this planet. Is the stress, anxiety and guilty conscience worth it? ❖

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## State of Black Mold

Newspaper headlines focusing on "black mold" prompted the Texas Medical Association (TMA) to study the issue. The association's Council on Scientific Affairs (CSA) searched medical and scientific literature and contacted Texas and national experts and specialists.

"Adverse health effects from inhalation of *Stachybotrys chartarum* spores in water-damaged buildings is not supported by available peer-reviewed reports in medical literature," concludes the CSA report, which was issued in September 2002.

"The hypothesis that exposure to molds and their toxic products may lead to adverse health effects can be made," says the report. "However, the proposition that molds in indoor environments may lead to adverse health effects through mechanisms other than infection and allergic/immunologic reactions is an untested impression."

To read the TMA report, go to <http://www.texmed.org/has/CSA%20Black%20Mold.doc>.

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