



Q&A Fact Sheet 2012 Iowa Harvest Exposure to Mold and Dust in Grain

Grain dust is always a health concern for Iowa farmers and those working in the grain industry. Drought conditions this year may elevate human and animal health concerns because of increased dust and mold exposure.

What are the most common health concerns?

- Grain dust contains more than just plant material and dirt. It can also contain molds and spores, insect parts and debris, bacteria, chemicals, or plant toxins.
- Exposure to low levels of grain dust during normal working conditions often causes reactions that are a nuisance, such as a cough, sore throat, nose and eye irritation, or feeling stuffed up or congested.
- People with chronic breathing problems or asthma may experience more symptoms or asthma attacks when exposed to high dust and mold levels.
- Exposures to moldy and dusty grain, especially large exposures, may also cause two specific medical conditions with similar symptoms:
 1. Farmer's Lung or Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis (FHP) – a fairly uncommon condition (one in 20 farmers) caused by a delayed allergic reaction to the dust. Repeated exposures can lead to permanent lung damage or limitations to work. A medical provider should be consulted.
 2. Organic Dust Toxic Syndrome (ODTS) – a more common toxic response to dust, molds, bacteria, or toxins in the grain dust. Recovery is usually in a few days, but a medical provider should be consulted.

Why does this year's crop present more of a risk?

- This year's drought may increase dust during harvest. The drought has also created conditions favorable to the production of aspergillus mold and associated aflatoxins.

What are the symptoms I should watch for?

- Common symptoms include cough, headache, chest tightness, muscle aches, fever, or generally not feeling well. If you have any of these symptoms, see your medical provider.

What should I do to protect myself during harvest?

- Avoid direct exposures to dust whenever possible.
- When working in extremely dusty conditions use a NIOSH-approved and certified "N-95" respirator that fits you properly. HOWEVER, consult your medical provider before using a respirator. Individuals with heart and lung conditions or other respiratory limitations should not use a respirator. N-95 respirators must be used only with a clean shaven face to ensure proper fit.
- People with chronic respiratory health issues should avoid dust exposure.
- If you have been exposed to large amounts of dust and you begin to feel ill, you should contact your medical provider for a proper medical evaluation.

Where can I go for more information?

- Contact the Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Consultation and Education program at 515-281-7629, or the State Environmental Toxicologist at 515-281-8707.