HEALTH BASICS

Eating moldy food

Eating moldy food means accidentally or knowingly consuming food where fungi have grown

WHAT IT IS
Consuming food where mold has grown

WHERE IT COMES UP
Spoiled food found during storage or meal preparation

WHY IT MATTERS
Mold may signal toxins or other food contamination

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A poison control service or healthcare professional

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Usually no test unless illness needs medical assessment

Overview

Mold is a type of fungus. It can appear as fuzzy, powdery, or discolored growth on food. The visible patch may be only part of it because thin, root-like threads can spread below the surface.

Eating moldy food is not a disease. A small accidental bite often causes no lasting problem. Some people develop nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or an allergic reaction. The risk depends on the food, the type and amount of contamination, and the person's health.

You cannot reliably identify a safe or harmful mold by its color. Cooking, scraping, or removing the visible patch does not make every moldy food safe. Some firm foods can be trimmed safely, but soft or moist foods usually need to be discarded.

Mold on improperly preserved food also deserves special care. A bulging or leaking container may contain dangerous germs even if mold is not visible.

How it works

Molds reproduce by making tiny particles called spores. Spores are common in the environment and can settle on food. Mold grows when conditions provide suitable moisture, temperature, oxygen, and nutrients.

Some foods are porous, meaning they contain spaces that mold threads can enter. Bread, soft fruit, cooked leftovers, yogurt, and soft cheese are examples. Removing the visible mold may leave hidden growth behind.

Certain molds can produce chemicals called mycotoxins. These toxins are different from the mold itself, and some are not reliably destroyed by ordinary cooking. Long-term exposure to high levels is a greater public health concern than a single accidental bite. Food producers and regulators monitor foods that are more likely to be affected, including some grains, nuts, and dried foods.

Mold may also grow alongside bacteria. A person who becomes ill after eating moldy food may be reacting to the mold, another contaminant, or an unrelated cause. Appearance alone cannot show which one is responsible.

Some foods are intentionally made with selected molds. Examples include blue cheese and cheeses with white rinds. The expected mold is part of production. Unexpected mold elsewhere on these foods still requires care.

Why it matters for your health

Most people who accidentally swallow a small amount of moldy food remain well or have brief stomach upset. There is usually no reason to arrange testing when you have no symptoms.

The possible effects are not the same for everyone. Someone with a mold allergy may react after eating or handling contaminated food. People with a weakened immune system may need earlier medical advice if they become unwell. Young children, older adults, and pregnant people also have a higher risk of complications from many forms of foodborne illness.

The condition of the container matters as much as the visible mold. Home-canned or fermented food can become unsafe when it was prepared or stored incorrectly. Botulism, a rare but serious illness caused by botulinum toxin, cannot be detected by tasting or smelling the food.

What can go wrong

Possible problems related to eating moldy food include:

Call emergency services now if there is trouble breathing, swelling of the tongue or throat, fainting, severe weakness, confusion, or difficulty speaking or swallowing.

Possible botulism signs also need emergency assessment. These include blurred or double vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, muscle weakness, or breathing difficulty after eating preserved food.

Seek prompt medical advice if vomiting is repeated, fluids will not stay down, there is blood in vomit or stool, abdominal pain is severe, or there are signs of dehydration such as very little urine, marked dizziness, or an unusually dry mouth. Contact a healthcare professional sooner when symptoms affect a young child, an older adult, a pregnant person, or someone with a weakened immune system.

Mild symptoms that are improving can usually be monitored. Routine follow-up is not generally needed after a small accidental bite when you remain well.

- Stomach and bowel upset: Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, or diarrhea may follow contaminated food.
- Foodborne infection: Bacteria may be present along with mold and can cause gastroenteritis, meaning inflammation of the stomach and intestines.
- Allergic reaction: Mold may trigger itching, hives, swelling, wheezing, or breathing difficulty in a sensitive person.
- Mycotoxin exposure: Certain molds produce toxins, particularly in some grains, nuts, and stored crops.
- Poisoning from unsafe preservation: Improperly canned, fermented, or sealed food may contain botulinum toxin or other dangerous contaminants. Mold does not itself mean botulism is present.

What you can do

If you have just eaten moldy food, stop eating it and rinse your mouth. Do not make yourself vomit. Check the package and consider what type of food it was, how much you ate, and whether it was home-canned or home-fermented.

For advice about a specific exposure, contact a poison control service. In the United States, Poison Control can be reached at 1-800-222-1222. Keep the package, label, receipt, or a photograph available if you call. Do not taste the food again to investigate it.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) advises discarding most moldy soft or moist foods. These include bread, baked goods, soft fruit, soft vegetables, cooked leftovers,

lunch meat, yogurt, sour cream, jam, soft cheese, and shredded or sliced cheese. Mold can spread beneath their surfaces.

A few firm foods can sometimes be salvaged:

Keep the knife out of the mold so it does not carry contamination into the remaining food. Place the trimmed food in clean wrapping. If you are uncertain whether a food is firm enough to trim safely, discard it.

Do not sniff moldy food. Sniffing can send spores into your nose and airways. Place discarded food in a covered bin, clean the area where it was stored, and inspect nearby foods that may have touched it.

Do not open, taste, or try to rescue food from a bulging, leaking, spurting, badly damaged, or unusually pressurized container. Follow local instructions for safely disposing of suspected home-canned food.

There is no useful home test that tells you whether moldy food contains mycotoxins or harmful bacteria. Testing is not normally needed after an isolated exposure. If illness develops, a healthcare professional can decide whether examination or tests are appropriate.

- Cut at least 1 inch around and below mold on hard cheese
- Cut at least 1 inch around mold on firm vegetables such as carrots
- Scrub surface mold from hard salami or dry-cured country ham

Common questions

Can I just remove the moldy part?

Usually not from soft, moist, sliced, shredded, or porous foods. Hidden mold can extend beyond the visible patch. Trimming is limited to certain hard cheeses, firm vegetables, hard salami, and dry-cured ham.

Does toasting or cooking moldy food make it safe?

Not reliably. Heat may kill some living mold, but it does not necessarily remove hidden contamination or destroy all mycotoxins.

Is mold on cheese always dangerous?

No. Some cheeses are made with selected molds. Expected blue veins or a normal white rind are part of those foods. Unexpected mold on soft cheese is a reason to discard it. Some hard cheeses can be trimmed as described above.

Should I worry after one accidental bite?

A small accidental bite often causes no problem. Monitor how you feel rather than trying to make yourself vomit. Contact a poison control service if the amount was large, the food was improperly preserved, you develop symptoms, or you are concerned about a specific exposure.

Can I tell whether mold is toxic by its color or smell?

No. Color and smell cannot identify mycotoxins or other contaminants. An absence of mold also does not prove that improperly canned food is safe.

Should I take medicine?

There is no routine medicine needed simply because you ate moldy food. Treatment, if any, is based on the symptoms and the type of exposure. A poison control service or healthcare professional can give advice for your situation.

Sources

- United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. "Molds on Food: Are They Dangerous?"
- United States Food and Drug Administration. Bad Bug Book: Handbook of Foodborne Pathogenic Microorganisms and Natural Toxins , second edition.
- World Health Organization. "Mycotoxins."
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Home-Canned Foods: Protect Yourself from Botulism."
- National Capital Poison Center. "Moldy Food: Is It Dangerous?"