



Special Report: Hiding in Your Home

In some stucco homes, there's a serious problem that most homeowners are unaware of, that unchecked, could shatter the dreams of owning a home.

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Sam Penrod reporting

The so called black mold problem from stucco has been in the headlines in recent years in humid climates, such as Texas and the east coast.

But just because Utah is a mostly dry climate, doesn't mean there aren't problems here with stucco, that can be hiding out of sight.

Within a year of moving into his brand new home, Don Harrison discovered something was wrong.

"We found out the stucco was leaking, within a few months," he says.

Charles Motz was having similar problems three years after moving into his new home.

"The stucco was really no water protection at all, and was getting into the foundation of the home," he says.

Stucco quickly became a popular choice for new homes in Utah during the 80's and 90's.

But in the building rush, there are potentially thousands of cases where stucco contractors failed to correctly install weather resistant barriers.

Dennis McCoy explains, "It's a really simple concept, and it has to do with the shingle effect, like you have on a roof. If things are lapped backwards, or you create a pocket because the bottom window flashing isn't brought over, you are going to get water in behind that system."

And after water gets trapped, it doesn't take long until mold can develop and serious damage is done.

"The wood was rotted, the particle board behind the black coating was rotted, it had to be replaced," Harrison says. "It was all dry rotted. You could put your finger through it."

Some companies now specialize in repairing stucco improperly installed, but it can be costly. Average repairs run about \$30,000.

What's worse for many homeowners -- most insurance companies now exclude mold problems from policies.

In other parts of the country, mold problems from stucco have led to numerous lawsuits against contractors. And in rare cases, black mold can become toxic and cause serious respiratory conditions.

But for hundreds of families in Utah, stucco problems are costing them the equity they've built up in owning their home and savings meant for retirement.

"We took care of it," Motz told us. "It's not cheap. It cost us about \$20,000 to redo this whole side of the house. But at least now we know we have a home that's not going to fall down."

"The stuff that he has put on now, I don't have any leakage anymore," Harrison says. "It's working a lot better, and it looks good, now that it's been put on correctly. But if I had my druthers and could afford it, I'd build a brick house, like the smart pig."

If you suspect mold could be in your stucco, you can look for warning signs, such as discoloration or cracks in the stucco, especially below windows OR rust stains that are bleeding through.

A home inspector trained to look for mold can also test for it.

We want to make it clear that stucco can work in Utah, but you should be aware there is the potential for problems.