



Water Leaks and Workplace Health and Safety

While some school buildings/work sites have escaped the winter weather relatively unscathed, others have experienced significant damage in recent weeks. Some schools/sites have experienced or continue to experience damage due to water leaks, including water dripping from the ceilings, damaged and falling ceiling tiles, loose floor tiles and a “musty smell” in the building. With several recent school closures due to the leaks, and many more schools still operating after experiencing leaks, it is important to be aware of the hazards that may exist in the workplace and how best to keep safe.

With more immediate hazards such as dripping water and loose tiles, members should take precautions to avoid wet and damaged areas entirely where possible and keep all classroom equipment, including any electrical equipment, away from any water or potential leak areas. Wet or damaged areas of your school/work site should be approached with caution and only if necessary.



With any type of water or moisture problem, there is potential for a longer-term threat to workplace health and safety with the growth of mould. Although mould occurs naturally almost everywhere, both indoors and outdoors, elevated levels of mould are most frequently found in areas where there are wet building materials and where there has been water damage due to, for example, water leaks. In addition, mould growth is most likely to be a threat to health when substantially more mould is found indoors than outdoors, or when the types of indoor mould differ from those found outdoors, especially if the mould is a toxic type.

Under normal circumstances, mould growth is relatively harmless to healthy individuals. However, some individuals, including those with weakened immune systems or respiratory problems, may experience adverse health effects such as allergic reactions, infections or toxic effects when exposed to high levels of mould. Common symptoms of toxic effects include headache, abnormal fatigue, nausea, eye and respiratory irritation and aggravation of asthma or allergies.

If you believe your school/worksite is unsafe because of water leaks or mould growth, you should first bring your concerns to the attention of your principal/supervisor. If you are not satisfied with your principal’s/supervisor’s response, you should then bring your concerns to your workplace Joint Occupational Health and Safety (JOHS) Committee, and ask the Committee to make specific recommendations to the principal/supervisor in writing. The principal/supervisor has to respond within 21 days. Finally, if the JOHS Committee has not addressed your concerns adequately, you may bring your concerns to an Officer with the Occupational Health and Safety Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Labour.

These timelines may not be fast enough to deal with significant leaks and damage that is time-sensitive; so if you are having trouble obtaining immediate action from your principal/supervisor, contact the NSTU Staff Officer for your region, who can contact the school board office directly.



This winter’s weather has resulted in many water leaks at schools throughout the province. Shown are photos from J.L. Ilsley High School in Halifax.

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