

Depression and respiratory illness in \$500m health bill

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By [Anne Gibson](#)



The leaky building scandal has cost New Zealand almost \$500 million in health bills and is taking a disastrous toll on people living in rotting, decaying homes.

A new, in-depth analysis of the financial cost on the population, commissioned by the Auckland City Council, has found the human dimension of the problem to be crippling.

The ground-breaking study assessed the full national health costs at about \$474 million, but said this was a conservative figure.

Fallout from the scandal is causing suicides, depression, anxiety and serious health problems such as asthma, resulting in hospitalisations and the need for extensive medical treatment.

In addition to this bill, other experts have attached a \$1 billion to \$5 billion tag to the further economic costs of repairing rotting and decaying buildings.

Places affected include public structures such as libraries, halls and schools; commercial developments; and apartments and houses.

The new study on the health cost was conducted by Wellington-based University of Otago academics Dr Nick Wilson, Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman, Professor Julian Crane and Dr Kristin Wickens. Associate Professor Ralph Chapman of Victoria University made the cost assessment.

"Preliminary cost estimates from the health effects of damp and mould from leaky dwellings were estimated. This work found that the incremental health costs of leaky

dwellings - primarily affecting respiratory and mental health conditions through increased mould and damp - are around \$474 million in present day terms," the study concluded.

Upper respiratory tract infections, coughs, wheezes, asthma and pneumonia were illnesses which could afflict people forced to live in leaky buildings.

Depression, dermatitis, airway inflammation, fatigue and headaches were also cited.

Moulds produced a complex mixture of volatile chemicals, blending alcohols, esters, aldehyde, various hydrocarbons and aromatics. These could cause nausea and make some people quite ill.

The study said the most rigorous review of an association between indoor mould and health effects was done by the Institute of Medicine of the United States National Academies of Science.

That review found sufficient evidence of an association between mould and nasal and throat symptoms such as wheezing, asthma symptoms in sensitised asthmatic people, coughing and hypersensitivity pneumonitis in susceptible people.

But the US study found only limited or suggestive evidence of an association between the mould and respiratory illness in otherwise-healthy children.

The new report said the burden of mould exposure in New Zealand was high, afflicting low-income communities, Pacific communities and tertiary students.

People living in houses with insufficient protection from noise, vibrations, dampness, moulds, draughts and cold were significantly more depressed and more anxious than others.

Stachybotrys, a type of fungus, has been cited as one of the worst dangers of living in a leaky house

The report recommended local authorities considered financing a new study, comparing people living in leaky houses with those living in structurally sound places, to show the range of health effects people attribute to leaky buildings. Any new studies on housing and health in Auckland should include work on mould exposure, it recommended.

HIDDEN NIGHTMARE

- * Mould grows in the walls of leaky buildings.
- * It can go undetected for many years.
- * It affects the air and causes health problems.
- * A report just out has quantified those health costs.

Under canvas

Jules Flight, of Mt Eden, suffered when his block was being repaired. He says "life under canvas" was horrid because of loss of privacy, security problems, noise and dirt.

Battle for cash

Colleen Dicks battled to get money to repair her place and suffered extreme mental anguish throughout her ordeal over her house in Waitakere City.

Lonely and sad

Pauline Hough of Takapuna endured financial hardship, and says her struggle over a leaky townhouse was lonely, frightening, humiliating and sad.