

Gateway Water & Mold: Finding Mold Behind Drywall After a Plumbing Leak

Water damage in a home is never straightforward. A leak can start small, maybe a drip from a supply line inside a wall, and go unnoticed for weeks. By the time someone realizes something is wrong, the damage has spread. Mold has already started growing behind the drywall, and the repair process becomes more complicated than just fixing the pipe. I have seen this pattern many times in the St. Louis area, and the case I want to walk through here is a good example of what happens when you let a plumbing leak sit too long.

The property was a rental home in a quiet neighborhood. The tenant had noticed a musty smell near the hallway bathroom but did not think much of it. A few days later, a small patch of discoloration appeared on the wall. The landlord was called, and a plumber came out to stop the leak, which turned out to be a slow drip from a joint behind the vanity. The plumber fixed the pipe, dried the visible water, and left. That is where the real problem started. The moisture that had soaked into the drywall and the wooden studs behind it was never properly dried. Within a week, mold began to grow in the dark, damp cavity behind the wall. [Gateway Water & Mold](#)

Why Hidden Mold Is a Different Beast

Mold behind drywall is not the same as surface mold you can wipe away. It feeds on the cellulose in the paper facing of the drywall and spreads through microscopic spores that travel through the air. Once the colony is established, it can release mycotoxins and allergens into the living space. In this case, the tenant had started to develop headaches and a scratchy throat, which is often the first sign that something is circulating through the HVAC system.

The landlord contacted us, and we sent a crew out to assess the situation. The first step was to check for moisture behind the wall using a moisture meter. We found readings above 70 percent in the area around the leak, which meant the drywall was still saturated even though the surface had dried. That is a classic sign that the water had wicked into the insulation and the wood framing. Cutting into the wall was the only way to know the full extent of the damage.

We opened a section of drywall about two feet by two feet near the base of the wall. Behind it, we found black mold growing on the paper backing of the drywall and on the wooden studs. There was also a musty smell that had been contained inside the wall cavity. The mold had not yet spread to the other side of the studs, but it was close. If the leak had gone undetected for another week or two, it would have reached the adjacent bedroom wall.

Removing Mold Behind Drywall

Mold removal in a situation like this requires containment. We set up polyethylene sheeting around the work area to prevent spores from drifting into the rest of the house. The HVAC system was turned off, and we sealed the vents in the affected room. We also brought in an Air Scrubber with a HEPA filter to clean the air continuously during the work. The Air Scrubber ran for the entire duration of the job, which was about three days.

We removed all the affected drywall, insulation, and a section of the wooden stud that had started to rot. The stud was cut out and replaced with new lumber. The remaining framing was treated with an antimicrobial solution to kill any lingering spores. The crawlspace below the bathroom was checked for moisture, and we found that some water had dripped down into the insulation under the house. That area had to be dried and treated as well.

The Drying and Restoration Phase

Drying a structure after water damage is not just about removing the wet materials. Structural drying means using equipment to pull moisture out of the wood and the remaining drywall. We set up a dehumidifier and a couple of high-velocity fans to circulate air through the wall cavity. The dehumidifier pulled out several gallons of water over the next 48 hours. We also used a HEPA vacuum to clean up any dust and debris from the cutting and demolition. The HEPA vacuum is important because a regular shop vac would just blow fine particles back into the air.

The ductwork in the crawlspace had to be inspected as well. The plumbing leak had dripped onto the duct insulation, and we found a small patch of mold growing there. The ductwork was cleaned with a HEPA vacuum and treated with an EPA-registered moldicide. The duct insulation was replaced where it had been saturated.

Coordinating With the Insurance Adjuster

This job involved an insurance adjuster because the landlord had coverage for water damage. The adjuster came out to inspect the damage and approve the scope of work. That is a common step in water damage restoration, especially when the mold remediation portion is involved. Some policies have PTO coverage, which means the policy covers the cost of removing the mold as part of the water damage claim. In this case, the adjuster approved the mold removal and the structural drying, which made the process smoother for the landlord.

The landlord also needed a renovation permit from the city of St. Louis because we were replacing a section of drywall and repairing the framing. That is something a lot of homeowners do not think about. If you are doing more than a small patch, the city may require an inspection to make sure the work meets code. We pulled the permit and scheduled the inspection for after the drywall was installed but before the painting and finishing. The inspector checked the framing, the insulation, and the vapor barrier. Everything passed.

The Importance of Acting Quickly

If the landlord had called a water damage restoration company right after the plumber fixed the leak, the mold might never have grown. The combination of water mitigation and structural drying right away would have prevented the conditions that mold needs to thrive. But that is not what happened. The delay gave the mold a head start, and the cost of the job went up significantly because of the mold removal and the extra drying time.

This is where a company like Gateway Water & Mold brings real value. They handle both the water damage and the mold remediation in one coordinated response. Instead of hiring a plumber, then a drywall contractor, then a mold specialist separately, the landlord was able to get one team that managed the whole process from start to finish. That saved time and reduced the risk of something being missed.

I have seen jobs where a homeowner tries to dry out a wall with a space heater and a fan, and it seems to work for a while. But a few months later, the mold comes back because the moisture never fully left the wood. The only reliable way to dry a wall cavity is with professional equipment and a methodical approach. The dehumidifier and the Air Scrubber are not optional in these situations. They are the tools that make the difference between a temporary fix and a permanent solution.

Lessons for Homeowners and Landlords

If you own a rental property in St. Louis, or anywhere with high humidity, you should treat any plumbing leak as a potential mold problem. Do not just dry the visible water. Cut into the wall if you have to, or call a professional who can check with a moisture meter. The cost of a small exploratory cut is nothing compared to the cost of a full mold remediation later.

Also, make sure your insurance policy covers mold removal. Some policies exclude it, or they cap the payout. If you have a rental property, talk to your agent about adding PTO coverage or a rider for mold. It is a small premium for a lot of peace of mind.

Finally, do not ignore the smell. A musty odor is the first warning that mold is growing somewhere you cannot see. If you smell it, start looking. Check behind baseboards, inside cabinets, and in the crawlspace. If you find mold, do not try to paint over it or bleach it. Bleach kills surface mold but does not reach the roots inside the drywall. The only fix is to remove the affected materials and dry the structure properly.

In the end, this rental home was restored to a safe, mold-free condition. The tenant moved back in after the drywall was replaced and the air quality was tested. The landlord learned a valuable lesson about the importance of acting quickly after a leak. And the crew from Gateway Water & Mold did the work that needed to be done, including the mold remediation,

the structural drying, and the final inspection. It was a textbook case of how water damage restoration and mold removal go hand in hand.