

ANOTHER potentially serious problem is the health effects of mould in new homes, which can cause problems such as asthma and flu-like symptoms. The worst is stachybotrys, a fungus that produces poisonous spores.

In New Zealand, stachybotrys was rare a decade ago. But in the past year scientist Elizabeth Ebbett, of the Auckland laboratory Biodet Services, estimates she has seen between 50 and 100 samples.

Stachybotrys needs very particular conditions — plenty of cellulose material to grow on (wood, paper, carpet backing), and plenty of water. The area has to be saturated for a long time.

New Zealand building repair expert Steve Alexander, often called in to investigate leaks in new buildings, says he regularly finds stachybotrys.

He says it generally does not become a health hazard until builders move in to repair the problems, knocking down walls and setting the toxic spores airborne.

In America, since the mid-1980s large-scale outbreaks of illness in areas with mouldy homes have been attributed to stachybotrys. Sick families have even taken lawsuits against landlords.

Most seriously, in Ohio, doctors have linked bleeding in the lungs of 45 children over the past seven years to the presence of the fungus. Sixteen of the children died. Research into the exact causes of the deaths continues, but all of them lived in homes where stachybotrys was found.

While stachybotrys-related health problems have not yet led to the courts in this country, our courts are already experiencing a steady trickle of leaky buildings cases.

The growing question is: who will pay? Alexander says he knows of one three-year-old \$1million central Auckland property where the cost will be six figures.

"There has been severe timber decay and we're having to take off probably 75 per cent of the cladding and perhaps rebuild 25 per cent of the outside walls and decks," said Alexander. "Some of the timber framing had no structural integrity at all — you could break it with your fingers."

If the worst predictions are right, many New Zealand homeowners could end up like Malcolm Fort, whose multi-level Mediterranean-style Devonport dream home has turned into a nightmare.

Water leaked from the balcony straight into the main bedroom and poured in through the back wall. Similar leaks have rotted the timber framing of the garage.

Builder Dempsey Morton says the 14-year-old house has had three owners and was sold before completion, but has offered to contribute to the repair bill, which Fort puts at \$12,000.

Fort says he's fed up with the endless repairs.

"I bought this house by the beach and here I am spending all my time fixing bloody botch-ups. I've spent two years — virtually all my spare time — doing jobs."



ROTTEN MESS: Leaks have rotted the timber framing of Malcolm Fort's garage.