

Aflatoxins in Corn

Aflatoxins are a group of chemicals produced by certain mold fungi. These fungi, *Aspergillus flavus* and *Aspergillus parasiticus*, can be recognized by yellow-green or gray-green, respectively, on corn kernels, in the field or in storage (Figure 1). Although aflatoxins are not automatically produced whenever grain becomes moldy, the risk of aflatoxin contamination is greater in damaged, moldy corn than in corn with little mold. Aflatoxins are harmful or fatal to livestock and are considered carcinogenic (cancer-causing) to animals and humans. In the Midwest, aflatoxin levels are highest during hot, dry summers. The prime conditions for the fungus to produce toxin are warm August nights in a period of drought.

In high-risk years, aflatoxin screening may be done at the elevator or where the corn is marketed. Rapid, on-site tests can determine the possible presence of aflatoxin, but they do not provide specific quantitative results. The toxins are produced inside the corn kernels and their presence can be determined only by specific analytical tests. Because aflatoxin levels can vary greatly from kernel to kernel, sampling the load, bin, or unit of grain is the most critical step in determining actual levels of aflatoxin.

How to sample corn for aflatoxin testing

Because aflatoxin does not occur uniformly through a lot of grain and is usually localized in a small area, the best approach is to make a composite sample consisting of subsamples from every part of a load, bin, or unit of corn. The recommended procedure is to sample periodically from a moving stream, combining these samples to obtain a composite sample of at least 10 lb of corn. An alternative is to sample with a probe through a storage unit (five perimeter samples and one center sample for each 6 feet of bin height). In the field, sample individual fields or parts of fields separately. Grain in trucks can be probed in the same way to collect samples of at least 5 lb per truck.

Fields that vary in cropping history, tillage practices, planting date, soil type, or hybrid can differ greatly in aflatoxin vulnerability. Sample a minimum of 10 to 30 locations within each field. To reach the same sampling frequency as testing grain in trucks, collect one sample (5-10 lb) for about every 5 acres. Immediately dry samples to 12–14 percent moisture to prevent aflatoxin development during transit or storage. High-moisture samples should be frozen and delivered to the laboratory in the frozen state. Dried samples maintain their quality best if shipped in cloth or paper containers.

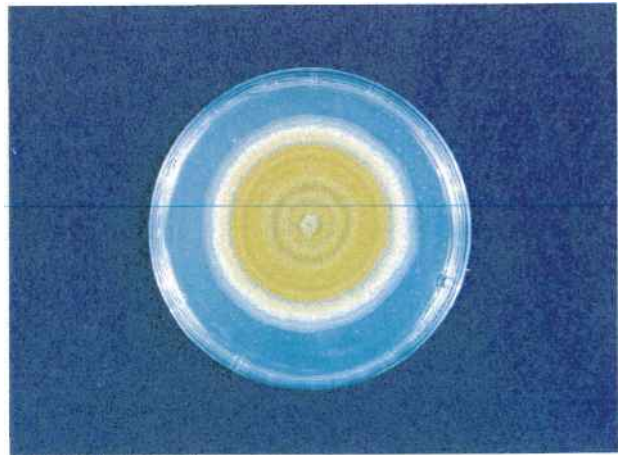


Figure 1. *Aspergillus* ear rot symptoms on corn ear (left) and growth of *Aspergillus flavus* in artificial culture (right).

How to test for aflatoxin

Currently, two types of screening tests are available: blacklight tests and commercial test kits. The blacklight (also called ultraviolet light) test is a visual inspection for the presence of a greenish gold fluorescence under light at a wavelength of 365 nm (nanometers). The greenish gold fluorescence looks like a firefly glow. More than four glowing particles per 5-pound sample (before grinding) indicate a likelihood of a +20 ppb (parts per billion) level of aflatoxins. However, remember that this test is an initial screening for the presence of aflatoxin and the results should be verified by laboratory analysis. If there are less than four glowing particles per 5 lb sample, this does not guarantee that the sample is free of aflatoxins.

Commercial test kits with immunoassay or ELISA techniques are available for on-site tests for aflatoxin. Immunoassay analysis is based on the detection of specific proteins found in aflatoxins using antibodies to identify these proteins. The tests are very specific for aflatoxin, but they require operator training and practice to be accurate. Some tests determine only the presence or absence of aflatoxin; others can quantify, within a range, the amount of aflatoxin present. If a lot of corn is rejected based on the results of an immunoassay test kit, the results also should be confirmed by laboratory analysis. The entire sample should be ground before removing a subsample for the test kit.

Analytical laboratories use one of several procedures such as thin-layer chromatography, mini columns, gas chromatography, or mass spectroscopy to determine aflatoxin levels. These procedures are highly accurate and quantitative. The laboratory should grind the entire sample of corn together before taking subsamples for analysis.

Corn samples to be analyzed can be sent to the Iowa State University (ISU) Plant Disease Clinic, to official USDA–FGIS (United States Department of Agriculture–Federal Grain Inspection Service) laboratories, or to a private laboratory. The ISU Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory analyzes samples submitted through a veterinarian. Contact your local extension office or go to www.iowagrains.org for a current list of public and private laboratories equipped for aflatoxin analysis.

Regulations regarding aflatoxin in corn

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has established an “action level” of 20 ppb for aflatoxins in corn in interstate commerce. This is the level at which federal agencies may take action, including seizure of the corn or prohibition of its sale. Elevators do not accept corn with 20 ppb or more of aflatoxin unless they have a known alternative use. Even one contaminated kernel in a 5-lb sample could result in more than 20 ppb aflatoxin. The FDA has guidelines for using contaminated grain in livestock feed (Table 1). These guidelines are based on maintaining performance and avoiding disease related to aflatoxin, except for dairy cattle where prevention of carcinogenic aflatoxin residues in milk is the concern.

Consequences of high concentrations of aflatoxin in corn

Aflatoxins are very potent compounds that cause a variety of human and animal health problems. On rare occasions, livestock can die from ingesting aflatoxin-contaminated feed. Most commonly, aflatoxin reduces the feed efficiency and reproductivity of livestock. It can suppress the immune system of animals, leading to more frequent occurrence of infectious diseases.

Unfortunately, the most abundant aflatoxin, aflatoxin B1, is a carcinogen. This raises human health concerns because aflatoxin can appear in the milk of dairy cows fed contaminated corn.

Table 1. FDA guidelines for acceptable aflatoxin level in corn based on intended use.

Intended use	Aflatoxin level (ppb)
Milk (Dairy Feed)	None detected
Corn of unknown destination	<20
Corn for young animals	<20
Corn for dairy cattle	<20
Corn for breeding beef cattle, swine, and mature poultry	<100
Corn for finishing swine	<200
Corn for finishing cattle	<300

How to prevent aflatoxin in corn

In Iowa, problems associated with *Aspergillus* and aflatoxins are most common in hot, dry years. The fungi survive in plant residues and produce abundant spores. The spores are carried by the wind and infect silks or kernels, usually through insect wounds. The fungi grow best in weather that is hot and sunny, warm at night, and dry during the silk and fill stage. Injury by insects, hail, drought stress, and early frost expose the kernels to infection. Insects can help spread the fungus within infected ears.

The amount of aflatoxin produced in storage is determined by storage conditions. The most important factors are grain moisture content and temperature. Optimum storage temperatures for *A. flavus* to grow are 80–90°F; optimum grain moisture content is 18 percent. Damaged corn also favors the growth of *A. flavus*. Importantly, aflatoxin concentration never decreases in storage; it only increases or remains the same.

The key to preventing ear rot and storage mold problems is detecting them early, in the field and in the bin. The following practices can reduce aflatoxin production in grain:

1. Control insects in the field. Second-generation European corn borers and corn earworms damage the ears, allowing for infection.
2. Scout. Early detection can prevent serious losses and avoid crises. Obtain good advance information as to the potential in your area. Scout at black-layer (physiological maturity) and again a couple weeks before harvest. Look at the primary ear for insect damage and *Aspergillus* spores (Figure 2).

If extensive infection is observed, a sample should be collected, as described on page 1, for aflatoxin analysis. Decisions on handling moldy grain should be made before the field is combined. Depending on the toxin results, the field should be harvested as soon as possible and the corn dried immediately to prevent further toxin development. After harvest, spoilage can occur quickly if delays result from indecision.

3. Adjust the combine to minimize kernel damage. Fungi infect damaged kernels more easily than intact ones.

4. Clean bins and grain-handling equipment and remove fines from the corn before storing. Old corn residue is frequently a source of contamination.
5. After the harvest, **clean** corn can be kept at 16 or 17 percent moisture during the winter. Moldy corn should be dried immediately to 15 percent moisture or less. Holding grain for even a short time can allow significant mold and mycotoxin development. For long-term storage, all corn should be dried to 14 percent, depending on the duration of storage. Moldy corn is not suitable for long-term storage.
6. Cool grain after drying, and maintain it at 35–40°F for the duration of the winter. Aeration can be used for temperature control. If the corn will be stored during the summer, use aeration to warm it to 50–60°F in the spring. Use aeration to control moisture and temperatures during cool periods in the summer. Next to moisture content, temperature is the most important factor in preventing the development of molds and toxins.
7. Control storage insects.
8. Check grain every 2 weeks in storage (more often if quality is suspect) for temperature, crusting, hot spots, moisture, and mold. If any of these conditions are detected, steps should be taken immediately to reduce the temperature, aerate the bin, break up hot spots, or remove spoiled grain.



Figure 2. *Aspergillus flavus* spores on damaged corn kernels.

9. Antifungal agents can be applied to grain to reduce mold growth in storage. These products, such as propionic acid, do not kill the mold already present or reduce toxins already formed. They may have disadvantages, such as restricting use of the corn. **If you plan to sell the corn, be certain that antifungal agents are allowable before using them.**

For more details on proper grain handling to prevent mold, mycotoxins, and other problems, see ISU publications AED 20, *Managing Dry Grain in Storage*, and Midwest Plan Service publication MWPS 13, *Grain Drying, Handling, and Storage Handbook*.

What to do with aflatoxin-contaminated corn

Corn that is contaminated at levels greater than 20 ppb may not be sold for interstate commerce. However, most grain can find a safe and legitimate use. Cleaning grain by screening or a gravity table can reduce aflatoxin concentrations by removing the most heavily contaminated particles. However, this can be expensive and it is not possible to predict just how much the aflatoxins will be reduced. The discards from the cleaning process should not be used as feed.

Feeding contaminated grain

Aflatoxin-contaminated grain may be used locally for animal feed, under the guidelines shown in Table 1. Livestock producers may be willing to purchase contaminated corn if it is below 200–300 ppb. There will probably be a discount to the price received, but there may not be other options. It is important that a good estimate of the aflatoxin level is obtained so that informed decisions can be made about feeding.

Binding agents such as sodium bentonite and aluminosilicates reduce the effects of aflatoxins on livestock. These products are approved for use in feed, although the FDA does not recognize their aflatoxin management properties.

Blending aflatoxin-contaminated grain with clean grain is not legal except in advance of direct feeding operations. Blended grain may not be sold in general commerce. Once aflatoxin levels are known or suspected, it is the owner's responsibility to isolate that corn from general commerce.

Ensiling corn usually does not reduce aflatoxin concentrations, although concentrations are unlikely to increase in properly managed silage.

Ethanol/Wet Milling

Corn with aflatoxins can be used for ethanol production. Aflatoxins do not accumulate in the ethanol but will be concentrated in the distiller's grains co-product. In wet-mill processing, aflatoxins concentrate in the gluten co-products. A rough estimate is that aflatoxin levels in feed co-products will be four times those in whole corn. Therefore, processors may not accept corn with aflatoxin if their co-product markets are sensitive to aflatoxin levels, such as dairy feed.

Ammoniation

Anhydrous ammonia reacts with aflatoxins and reduces concentration. However, this practice is not approved for interstate commerce, so ammoniated grain can be used only on-farm. Ammonia can be applied as a gas or liquid, but in either form it is a difficult and dangerous procedure. This should be done only by a trained and experienced operator.

File: Pest management 2-5

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