

Pesticides and Your Home

The History of Pesticides

We all depend on farms to provide us with one of our basic needs for survival: food. Farmers know the importance of protecting their crops from unwanted pests and they have been doing it for the last several thousand years.

One of the first recorded uses of insecticides was in 2500 B.C. by Sumarians, who used sulphur compounds to control insects and mites.

As time has gone by, pest control has become a standard of our everyday life. Farms, restaurants, food processing plants, hotels, warehouses, office buildings and our homes are generally protected by some sort of pesticide to kill unwanted and potentially disease-causing pests, as well as to reduce weeds around our properties. Today 900,000 farms and 70 million households use pesticides in the United States, with agriculture using 75% of all pesticides.

What is a Pest?

No, not your little brother.

Generally speaking, pests are unwanted organisms that cause damage to crops, humans or other animals. Examples include:

- Insects
- Rodents
- Weeds
- Fungi
- Microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses

Pesticides are substances intended to prevent, destroy, control, disinfect or repel a pest.

How Safe are Pesticides?

The safety of a pesticide depends on how the product is used. If you're applying pesticides yourself, you should read the label of any product you use first. "Safety" refers more to the use and application of the product than the actual product itself.

"Safe" materials that when used not in accordance with the label or used in a negligent fashion, can have adverse health effects on the user or non-intended humans or animals. For example, water is perfectly safe to drink and swim in but if you were to inhale water and allow it to fill your lungs, you would drown. That is not its intended use.

Pesticide Safety Tips

Pesticides perform a necessary function in keeping the food we eat, and our homes, free of contamination from disease-causing pests. However, when misused or misapplied, the risk of pesticide exposure and danger increases. Some basic safety tips include:

- Avoid the need for pesticide use around your home whenever possible by focusing on "exclusion" and keeping pests outside of your home. Seal any gaps in window frames,

- fix garage door seals, repair screens containing holes, remove pest harbor points, clean up leaf litter and debris, store grass seed and pet food in sealed containers, fix leaky downspouts and faucets, etc.
- When using a lawn care company or an extermination company, request the labels and Material Data Safety Sheets (MSDS) for any pesticide that will be possibly used in or around your home and property.
 - The label is the law.
 - Follow all mixing and safety instructions and wear apparel (gloves, goggles, etc.) as listed on the label. You wouldn't cook a turkey at 800° on Thanksgiving to help it cook faster; utilizing a "double strength" formulation when mixing pesticides yourself will not result in improved results.
 - Take special care to remove any toys, food, clothing, fish tank, pet dishes and similar objects when using pesticides in and around your home. Pesticides, when applied to a non-targeted area, can result in unwanted pesticide contamination.
 - When applying pesticides outdoors, be aware of "drift" (material carried via air due to a windy day) and "runoff" (material carried via water due to drainage or another water source).
 - Keep the Poison Control Center number close by: 1-800-222-1222.

Pesticide Disposal

When you are finished with your pesticides, you must store them and/or dispose of them according to the label. There are some basic rules for dealing with pesticide disposal:

- Never dispose of unused pesticides down a sewer drain, sink, toilet or any other water source.
- Some communities have a pesticide or hazardous material collection day. Be sure to take advantage of that opportunity by turning in any unwanted or unused pesticides.

IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY

Should you be faced with a pesticide poisoning emergency, you should contact 911 or the Poison Control Center immediately. Quick action is paramount when dealing with a pesticide poisoning emergency.

Before calling, determine what pesticide the afflicted individual was exposed to, try to determine if the pesticide was inhaled or swallowed and determine what part of the body was exposed (e.g., eyes, throat, nose, etc.).

Have the label and/or MSDS sheet on hand when making the call.

Sources: *Environmental Protection Agency; EcoSmart.com blog; New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP): Pesticides in the Home.*