



No. 46: First Aid for Pesticide Emergencies

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BACKGROUND

Exposures to pesticides (insecticides, herbicides, rodenticides, etc.) require immediate care. If you work with pesticides, be able to recognize symptoms of exposure and do not wait until symptoms become severe to seek treatment. Although some symptoms may not appear right away or are not always the result of pesticide contact, if they appear within 24 hours after exposure, seek medical advice.

Specific care and treatment depends on the type of pesticide and how a person is exposed. The pesticide label will provide first aid information specific to the product. Therefore, always read the label before using a pesticide, and follow its instructions. Although the label should be the primary source of information, the following general first aid tips contain basic information for professional and household exposures.

GENERAL FIRST AID

In cases of serious illness or if pesticides have been swallowed, call 911 immediately. If you are alone with a person who has been exposed, first make sure the person is breathing and not being further exposed to pesticide. First aid should not be a substitute for professional care, but should be administered while help is on the way.

For less serious cases, call a physician or Poison Control for first aid information or exposure concerns. The Poison Control hotline (1-800-222-1222) should be posted in pesticide storage areas and kept close to a phone. This number can also often be found inside the cover of phone books.

If you are assisting someone who has been exposed to pesticides, ensure that you are not being exposed as well. Move away from the source. Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) if necessary.

If you are assisting someone who has inhaled pesticide, when possible, move the person to fresh air. Move away from the area where you can smell pesticides. If the person is indoors, wear appropriate PPE such as a respirator before entering the area to help, and open windows and doors. If an appropriate respirator is not available and the area cannot be entered safely, wait for emergency responders.

Action often must be taken quickly, but always follow label instructions or professional medical advice. Treatment that is not exactly as directed could cause more harm.

If pesticides are swallowed, DO NOT induce vomiting unless you are instructed to do so by the label or a medical professional. Pesticides and solvents that are acidic, alkali, emulsified concentrates, or oil/petroleum-based can cause additional harm this way.

- When vomiting is the treatment directed on the label, syrup of ipecac is no longer recommended to treat pesticide poisonings because of its slow reaction time.
- Activated charcoal may be used to absorb swallowed pesticide, or water or milk (up to a quart for adults and older children, or 1-2 cups for children under the age of 5) may be used to dilute it.
- If pesticide has splashed onto or into the mouth but has not been swallowed, rinse with plenty of water.

For dermal (skin) exposure, remove contaminated clothing and wash exposed skin and hair, avoiding harsh scrubbing. Ideally, shower if possible, and use a gentle detergent instead of soap. Cover burns with a clean, soft cloth, but do not apply any creams, ointments, or other medications unless instructed to do so by a medical professional.

Dispose of heavily contaminated clothing. Place lightly contaminated clothing in a bag until it can be washed separately from other laundry.

If a pesticide gets in the eyes, immediately hold the eye(s) open and gently flush with cool, plain water for at least 15 minutes. Do not use eye drops, chemicals, or medications in the wash water. If the person is wearing contacts, try to remove them after flushing.

Inform emergency responders, doctors, and others assisting that a pesticide is involved. They may need to take precautions to protect themselves as well.

Keep the pesticide label to show the medical professionals. If you must bring the whole container, seal it in plastic bag to protect others from exposure.

If you work with or around pesticides, make sure you have quick access to a pesticide first aid kit. It should include:

- A mild detergent
- Activated charcoal
- At least one quart of clean, drinkable water
- A clean jar with a lid for drinking or for collecting a sample if required
- A blanket

SOURCES

Module 10: First Aid for Pesticide Poisoning. Pesticide Safety Education Program, Cornell University Cooperative Extension. <http://psep.cce.cornell.edu/Tutorials/core-tutorial/module10/index.aspx>

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