



Pesticides

Handle with Care

Alternatives to Pesticides

It may be possible to control a pest problem without a pesticide. In some cases, nontoxic alternatives are readily available. Your local Cooperative Extension Service can provide advice on the best strategy for controlling pests in and around your home. Consider using alternative methods of pest control before using a commercial pesticide.



To many homeowners, pest control is synonymous with chemicals, and quick eradication is the goal. Pesticides is an umbrella term that includes herbicides, insecticides, fungicides and rodenticides. Designed to kill pests, this big family of chemicals can be dangerous to human health and the environment, too. There is a considerable controversy about potential risks associated with pesticides. Some toxicologists believe pesticides can trigger allergic reactions or cause chronic health problems. Other toxicologists say that, if used properly, pesticides pose no significant risks to human health unless a person is exposed to too much either through a large exposure (such as a spill) or through small exposures over a long period of time, particularly if protective clothing is not used.

Minimizing Pesticide Hazards

To minimize the potential hazards of pesticides, follow these guidelines:

- Read the label carefully.
- Never apply to bare ground or eroded areas (when it rains, many pesticides bind tightly to soil and can be carried along with sediments to storm sewers and streams). Don't apply if rain is forecast unless otherwise specified on the label (some pesticides do not need to be watered in after application).
- Choose the least toxic pesticide (those with the signal word "caution" on the label are considered least toxic, whereas the signal word "warning" indicates moderate toxicity).
- Buy only the quantity you need.
- Wear any protective clothing specified on the label.
- Wash hands immediately after applying the pesticide.
- Apply only the amount specified on the label and only to the plants and areas listed in the instructions.
- Make sure people and pets are out of the area during application and until the spray has dried.
- Cover or remove exposed foods, fish tanks, pet food and water dishes during and after application.
- Never apply near wells, streams, ponds or marshes unless the instructions specifically permit such use.

Storage

Poisonings and environmental contamination have occurred where pesticides were stored improperly. To be safe, store unused pesticides in an area well away from living areas. The place you choose should have a cement floor, be well-lit, well-ventilated, insulated from temperature extremes, out of direct sunlight and out of a child's reach. For example, a locked metal cabinet in your garage is usually a good storage place for pesticides. Always keep pest control products in their original containers with labels intact. Most pesticides stored under these conditions should remain effective for two years, although this varies widely.

Spills

It can be extremely difficult to completely decontaminate an area when a pesticide has been spilled. For this reason, never store these products in the kitchen or other living areas.

If a pesticide leaks or is spilled in the garage, on the driveway or other outdoor areas, do not hose down the spill. This will cause further contamination and may carry the pesticide to storm sewers or other water sources. The best way to clean a small spill is to:

- Surround the contaminated area with dirt.
- Sprinkle sawdust, kitty litter, vermiculite or some other absorbent material over the spill.
- Shovel or sweep the absorbent material into a sturdy plastic bag and put it in the trash.
- Wear rubber gloves, long pants and rubber boots while cleaning up.
- Keep pets and other people away.
- Wash down the area (if it is a garage floor or other hard floor surface) with a solution of water and bleach, ammonia or a strong detergent.
- If pesticides spill directly into water, notify public health authorities and your state fish and game agency immediately. Keep people and pets away from the spill. In small ditches, it may be possible for you to prevent further contamination by building a soil dike downstream from the spill.

Pest Control Companies

Pests inside the home – termites, cockroaches, insects and mice – often mean professional pest control services for the consumer. Check out the company before you sign a contract, and insist on knowing what pesticides they plan to use. The pest control operator should be willing to give you a copy of the pesticide label, explain why a particular pesticide has been chosen for the job, describe what techniques will be used and list the precautions you may need to take after the operator leaves.



What to do With Leftovers

Pesticides should never be buried in your yard, burned or poured into storm drains or your toilet. Some pesticides and their containers release toxic fumes when burned or wetted, and sewage treatment plants do not use the kinds of microbes that would neutralize the pesticide's harmful effects. Septic systems can be harmed by pesticides as well. The best method for safely disposing of pesticides is to buy only as much as you plan to use within a two-year period and to use them up according to label instructions.

Federal law now requires that pesticides made for home use be labeled as to the appropriate disposal method. Again, it is essential to read the label carefully and follow its directions. Consult your Cooperative Extension Service agent for guidance in disposal of older pesticides with unreadable labels.



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