

June-Pesticide Poison-Case Review

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Last summer I saw Bill, a 55 year old farmer who presented with chronic headache, fatigue, and change in vision. These were all new symptoms that developed early June. He woke up with the headache and could get little done during the day due to his tiredness. He felt that maybe he had an allergy since his eyes were watering so much.

Bill had been vaccinated against Covid and denied any history of Covid. His PCR test for Covid was negative. Tylenol was only partly helpful for his headaches, but did not help his extreme fatigue. He had not had a history of allergies in the past, but had been out in the field 3 weeks earlier spraying.

While symptoms of pesticide poisoning can look like a variety of human illnesses, they are often subtle and misdiagnosed. Excessive eye watering, fatigue, headache, nausea, diarrhea, and confusion or trouble with coordination can all occur as a result of exposure.

Pesticides can get on our skin and absorb in a very short time frame. Spills or slashing during mixing, time during spraying or when crops are touched are all times when exposure can occur. In fact, even washing clothes with pesticides on them can create blood and urine levels.

Inhalation is a very rapid means of getting pesticides into the system. A farmer spraying the wind, especially in an open tractor or hand/back pack sprayer, can cause relatively high levels of toxin. It is rare for pesticides to be swallowed, but occurs when pesticide use is associated with eating, drinking or smoking cigarettes in the field during application. Children may get exposed when they are stored in containers that may also hold food.

The most important issues around pesticides is prevent exposure by wearing protective clothing, gloves, masks, and eye protection. Clothing that is used when application is occurring should be turned inside-out and carefully laundry to protect others. Do not smoke or consume any product when applying, and always protect the respiratory system with either approved masks/respirators with a closed cab and ventilation.

If exposure does occur, get the clothing off and skin washed with soap and cool water as soon as possible. If a splash gets into the eye, wash with water for 10-15 minutes. If swallowed, seek medical attention or call the poison control center. Bring the container or the MSDS sheets (good idea to keep these sheets in a central location that is easy to access for medical emergencies). These products can cause the person to stop breathing, so time to medical care is important. As in any case, exposure to poison is dependent upon the amount of chemical, the route and time of exposure.

Our knowledge of pesticides and prevention of exposure is much better today than in the past, when exposure was more common. However, the products have also become more toxic to that extreme care is needed to prevent issues like Bill had. He was diagnosis with possible urine levels. Interestingly, both is wife and youngest child also had positive levels though were not ill.

For more information, please contact the Carle Center for Rural Health and Farm Safety at 365-7961 or visit www.carle.org/farmsafety.