



Pesticides poison thousands of Canadians annually

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OTTAWA -- More than 6,000 Canadians -- almost half of them children -- suffer acute pesticide poisoning every year, according to the first comprehensive national survey of the issue.

"The numbers are shocking," says Gideon Forman, executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. "It is very worrisome that almost half of the victims were under six years old."

"This is a much bigger problem than anybody previously suspected," says David Boyd, author of the report, which was based on data from poison control centres across the country.

Boyd's report tracked only acute pesticide poisonings -- those resulting in immediate effects, such as blistering of the skin, respiratory distress, heart palpitations and vomiting.

Suspected chronic effects of pesticides, such as a higher risk of cancer, neurological diseases such as Parkinson's, birth defects and organ damage, were not taken into account in the report, which was released Thursday by the David Suzuki Foundation.

More than 2,800 children under the age of six suffer acute pesticide poisoning in Canada every year, comprising 46.5 per cent of all recorded cases, the report found.

Quebec had the highest number of reported pesticide poisonings overall, with 2,096, followed by Ontario with 1,629, and Alberta with 1,021. Provinces with large populations of farmers had the highest per-capita incidence: 33 per 100,000 for Saskatchewan and 30 per 100,000 for Alberta. Ontario had a reported 13 cases per 100,000. No fatalities were reported.

Boyd says the report's findings fall below the actual incidence of poisonings, noting there are no national standards for collecting the data.

The Maritime provinces, for example, don't report how many pesticide-poisonings involve children, and Manitoba provided only partial data.

"It was obvious from conversations with doctors and staff at a number of poison control centres that there is an urgent need for more resources ... standardized reporting and recording, and a national approach," the report says.

By contrast, the U.S. has a state-of-the-art tracking system for all poisons that gathers real-time data from more than 60 poison-control centres, breaking it down into the source of the poison, the severity of its effects, age of the patient and other factors of interest to health officials.

The report notes the "incomplete and inconsistent Canadian system" estimates 2,832 cases of child pesticide-poisoning cases annually, whereas "the more comprehensive American system records more than 52,000 such cases."

That's 20 times the Canadian figure, in a population that is 10 times larger than Canada's, Boyd says. That suggests the Canadian figures are significantly underreported, he says.

The federal Pest Management Regulatory Agency says manufacturers and some poisoning victims have, in the past, come forward voluntarily every year to report acute exposures; these typically amount to only five to 20 cases a year.

But the agency, which sets the safety rules for pesticides, recently expanded this program, making incident reports mandatory for manufacturers, says agency spokesman Jean-Pierre Lachaine.

It has received 20 to 30 reports since that rule came into effect in April, said Lachaine. So far, all have been minor incidents, he said.

And the PMRA is setting up a website for members of the public and health-care professionals to report poisoning incidents electronically. These reports, along with agency analyses of the data, will be posted on the web once the program starts toward the end of this year, he adds.

"That's a step forward," says Dr. Robin Walker, former chief of neonatology at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. "Canada has been lagging well behind the U.S. in this regard."

However, he adds the reporting of pesticide poisonings by health-care workers should be mandatory, not voluntary, so that cases don't fall between the cracks.

Boyd agrees, pointing to a 2006 article in the British Columbia Medical Journal that noted poisonings that are dealt with directly by physicians and medical clinics, rather than a poison control centre, go unreported.

Walker, a prominent leader in last year's unsuccessful push for a bylaw to restrict cosmetic pesticides in Ottawa, says such issues are urgent in Canada, arguing regulations here are "not rigorous," especially when it comes to assessing the potential effects of chronic, low-level exposure to pesticides.

Boyd agrees, noting there are about 1,000 pesticide products for sale in Canada that are banned in other nations because of health concerns.

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