

Cultural Beliefs About Pesticides Put Mexican Farmworkers at Risk

November 5 2009, By Patricia McAdams

(PhysOrg.com) -- Chemical pesticides are among the tools farmers often use in managing insects dedicated to dining on our nation's harvest. Pesticides, unfortunately, are not without risk to those who labor in the fields and orchards, planting, tending and harvesting crops.

This risk increases for Mexican farmworkers, according to a study appearing online in a supplemental issue of the [American Journal of Public Health](#).

“For one thing, Mexican immigrant farmworkers’ knowledge of, and beliefs about, pesticides differ from traditional occupational health definitions, such as those of the [Environmental Protection Agency](#),” said lead author Shedra Amy Snipes, Ph.D. The EPA, for example, defines pesticides as any substance intended for preventing, destroying, repelling or mitigating any pest. Yet Snipes says that immigrant farmworkers tell her that pesticides are substances “that smell badly and are very strong.”

“Our dominant finding was that farmworkers consider dry pesticide residues, which they call ‘powder,’ to be relatively harmless, compared with sprays and liquids, which are foul smelling and, therefore, considered harmful,” said Snipes, who was at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center when the study took place. She is currently a National Cancer Institute fellow at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center

Snipes and her colleagues, who followed 99 Mexican farmworkers in

Washington State from March 2005 to February 2006, also learned that farmworkers often decline the use of safety gear to help protect themselves against pesticides. They refuse because it slows them down, reducing their yield, which translates into less pay to take home for their families. When farmworkers receive an hourly wage, however, then they wear safety gear.

Farmworkers also delay showering and decontamination at the end of the hot day in the fields, because their joints are aching and they believe the effects of the water on their overheated bodies could be harmful.

Thomas Arcury, Ph.D., director of the Center for Worker Health at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, says the study “reinforces the calls of many occupational health and social justice advocates for the enforcement of existing pesticide safety regulations in agriculture — and for these regulations to be expanded to reflect the work experiences of immigrant workers.”

According to Snipes, farmers apply more than 60 million pounds of pesticides to agricultural crops annually. “This means significant human exposure to illness-inducing and potentially cancer-causing agents as a sheer factor of one’s work. Considering the cultural perspectives of immigrant workers is critical if we are to create sensitive and effective ways to prevent harmful exposure among these individuals.”

More information: Snipes SA, et al. “[Pesticides](#) protect the fruit but not the people:” Using community-based ethnography to understand farmworker pesticide-exposure risks. *Am J Public Health* 99(S3), 2009.

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