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Communication Facts - Special Populations: Migrant Workers - 2002 Edition

Agriculture is one of the most hazardous major industries. Migrant farmworkers encounter conditions conducive to injuries, chronic diseases, and even fatalities. While scarce, studies suggest that farmworkers and their families may be at risk of developing speech, language and hearing problems during their tenure in agricultural jobs or are at risk of developing communication and related disorders after they leave because of exposure to hazardous working and living conditions. Speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and researchers can improve the health of farmworkers by (a) developing farmworker health-care programs, (b) elaborating research agendas, (c) advocating for funding and policies, (d) influencing education programs, and (e) joining coalitions to inform the public about communication disorders and the provision of speech-language pathology and audiology services to this population.

Definitions

- Migrant farmworkers travel north during the growing season, following the crops, or travel back and forth from home bases in Florida, Texas, California, and Mexico. Seasonal farmworkers reside where they work. The at-risk conditions described below may apply to these and other farmworker populations.

General Demographics

- There are approximately 3 to 5 million migrant farmworkers in the U. S. every year. About 80% are Latinos or of Latin American ancestry. They can also be African American, European American, Caribbean, Southeast

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- Asian, and Eastern European (1).
- An estimated 250,000 children migrate each year, and approximately 90,000 of them migrate across an international border. An estimated 43,000 children accompanied by family members and an additional 55,000 unaccompanied minors are involved in farm labor (2).

Health Issues

- Diseases of the ear, nose, and throat and newborn conditions in migrant communities have been found statistically significantly higher compared to the general population (7).
- Hypertension and diabetes are significantly present in this population. Both place African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians at high risk for strokes (3,4,5). Hypertension is associated with psychosocial stresses and work conditions (6).
- Family members who do not work in the fields may be indirectly sprayed by pesticides if homes and communities are near working fields (12).
- Among the twenty most common principal diagnoses in migrant health clinics are diabetes, health supervision of infant or child, otitis media, upper respiratory infection, hypertension, and external ear disorders (7).
- Farming is one of the professions most at risk for noise-induced hearing loss (8). A study showed that 10% of 25-34-year-old, 30% of 35-44-year-old and 50% of 45-54-year-old farmers had a hearing impairment (9).

At-Risk Conditions for Speech, Language, and Hearing Problems

Access

- 72.8% of migrant children are completely without health insurance (10).
- Medicaid restricts its use outside of a particular state and hinders access to health care even for migrants who are insured in a particular state (10).
- Other barriers to medical and health insurance services include lack of appropriate documentation, short length of stay in most

states for eligibility, daytime medical office hours, fear of deportation or compromising citizenship eligibility, geographic isolation, poverty, and lack of multilingual services (10,11).

Chemicals

- Exposure to pesticides is a great concern. Pesticide exposure may be more severe for children than adults because of their smaller body mass and their different metabolisms.
- A study found that about half of children had worked in fields still wet with pesticides and that more than one third had been sprayed directly (12).
- Exposure to pesticides during and post pregnancy may have long term effects such as neurological damage or birth defects in children. The brain, skeleton, thyroid, and immune system are potential targets of chemicals that cause endocrine damage (13).
- Chemical exposure may cause developmental disorders, learning disabilities, mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, and other anomalies that interfere with cognitive abilities (14, 15).
- Pesticides have been associated with an increase in brain and neurological cancers in children (15).
- Exposure to pesticides causes an increase in cancer in migrant workers as compared to the general population. Migrant workers exhibit an increase in cancer, particularly in the mouth and pharynx. The cancer incidence could be higher, but high mortality rates due to accidents and other diseases may keep statistics lower (16).
- The exposure to agricultural chemicals is being studied in relation to increases in neurodegenerative disorders, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and risk of cleft palate (9, 17, 18).

Noise

- Farm noise exposure from machinery, small engines, and power tools is the major cause of hearing loss in farmers, which starts at an early age. Hearing loss is characterized as being high-frequency sensorineural (9, 20, 21).

Accidents

- Injuries to farmworkers mostly occur during interactions with machinery such as tractors and with animals. While performing their chores, farmworkers may fall from or be struck by machines or animals, which may result in bruises or fractures to the head (22).

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