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Focus on Tobacco: Farmworkers Suffer Occupational Poisoning

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Focus on Tobacco

Farmworkers Suffer Occupational Nicotine Poisoning

There is much attention paid today to the negative effects tobacco has on consumers. Farmworkers who handle the tobacco plant in the fields are not immune, however, to the harmful effects of the tobacco leaf. Above and beyond the widespread health problems farmworkers face from pesticide exposure, many suffer from a condition unique to the tobacco fields: green tobacco sickness (GTS).

Though not a new problem, green tobacco sickness was first documented in tobacco workers in Florida in 1970. It was found that nicotine, the major active ingredient in tobacco, is a water-soluble chemical which is easily absorbed by cultivators' bodies while they handle wet tobacco leaves. Nicotine enters workers' bodies through their skin, lungs, and gastrointestinal tracts.

The symptoms of green tobacco sickness include nausea, vomiting, dizziness, abdominal cramps, headaches, shortness of breath, weakness, and blood pressure and heart rate fluctuations. While these acute effects of the sickness last only one or two days, there may be

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What You Need To Know About Tobacco

- Tobacco is currently grown in more than 120 countries around the world (Goodman, 1993).
- China, the world's largest producer of tobacco, grows 38% of the world's crop. Growers in the United States account for 10% of the world tobacco crop (Goodman, 1993).
- Tobacco is responsible for the livelihood of at least 100 million people woldwide, though tobacco accounts for only 0.3% of all cultivated land (Goodman, 1993).
- In the United States, 48,800 people are employed at 114 tobacco factories in 21 states. 136,000 people farm tobacco in 23 states (California Medical Society).
- Almost 900 million pounds of flue-cured tobacco were grown and sold in the United States in 1996. In North Carolina, 557 million pounds were grown (NC Cooperative Extension Service, 1997).
- Seventeen million pounds of pesticides and other chemicals were applied to North Carolina's 280,000 acres of tobacco fields in 1996 (NC Department of Agriculture, 1997) .
- The cost of health care for tobacco-related diseases in 1993 was $50 billion, or $2.06 per pack (Center for Disease Control). This does not include the toll of occupational nicotine poisoning or green tobacco sickness.
- As Washington considers a host of tobacco legislation, growers are speaking out for monetary compensation to offset income loss due to new smoking restraints. Current proposals would give $28 billion from settlement penalties to growers and farming interests over the next 25 years. Some of this money would help growers explore possible alternatives to tobacco (Raleigh News & Obsever, 2/17/98).

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unmeasured effects of prolonged occupational exposure to the nicotine in tobacco.

An anonymous tobacco worker quoted in by the National Drug Strategy Network said, "Nothing has ever made me as sick as tobacco. It can make you feel like you're going to die."

To treat green tobacco sickness, farmworkers are given Dramamine and Benadryl. However, green tobacco sickness is often hard to distinguish from pesticide poisoning, so it is difficult to diagnose and treat.

Medical care for green tobacco sickness ranges in cost from $250 for outpatient care to over $2,000 for intensive care treatment. This cost may be difficult to meet by uninsured farmworkers who must also incur lost wages during their illness.

Workers can also be protected from green tobacco sickness. Protective clothing, chemical resistant gloves, plastic aprons and rainsuits can decrease nicotine exposure. However, these solutions cause increased heat stress in the hot summer months.

If a worker's clothes become saturated with moisture from tobacco leaves, the worker should change into dry clothes as quickly as possible. Finally, if a worker becomes sick, a physician should be notified of recent nicotine exposure to aid in diagnosis.

For green tobacco sickness information, call the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health at (513)841-4353.

Organic Tobacco Gains Both Popularity and Criticism

Large, mainstream brands of cigarettes may contain any of 599 additives disclosed by manufacturers. These include flavorings such as cocoa, licorice, sugar and more adulterated substances such as ammonium sulfide, butanone, and isobutyric acid. These additives, which cigarette companies such as Philip Morris and RJR Nabisco Holdings say improve cigarette flavor and freshness, are now being scrutinized by some smokers. Just as many consumers are refusing to buy produce treated with chemicals, some smokers are looking for a purer tobacco to smoke. Choices are slim, but tobacco without additives and organic tobacco are becoming popular.

According to the Wall Street Journal, sales of additive-free American Spirit tobacco and cigarettes, which are produced by the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company, have risen at a yearly rate ranging from 60 to 95 percent since 1993. Fitting with their desire to return to the natural roots of tobacco production and consumption, the Santa Fe based company is pushing a new line of organic tobacco. In 1990, the company bought organically grown tobacco from a couple of growers. This year they are purchasing organic tobacco from fifteen growers in North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. Kentucky and Pennsylvania use a state certification program for organic produce. North and South Carolina organic tobacco growers are certified by the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association.

Organic tobacco is attractive to some growers because it can be sold for a higher price. It can be grown in small, well maintained fields, and those working in the fields can avoid occupational pesticide exposure. Some of the most successful growers of organic tobacco have developed and implemented innovative pest management techniques. For example, one Darlington, South Carolina grower plants sunflowers alongside tobacco. The flowers draw ladybugs and birds which eat the aphids and worms which so often plague tobacco fields.

Critics of American Spirit brands are quick to point out that additive-free and organic cigarettes are still dangerous to the health of smokers. They remind consumers that additive-free does not mean addictive-free and that there are many harmful elements even in pure tobacco smoke. Some organic activists decry any connection between the delicate organic label and tobacco products, which have been proven carcinogenic.

Nevertheless, according to the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company, demand for organic tobacco is growing faster than the supply. Supply is short because tobacco must be grown on United States Department of Agriculture allotted fields. Therefore, the difficult match must be made between a grower who wishes to produce organic tobacco and who also has acreage alloted to tobacco production.