

Pesticides - safety when you use a pest control service

Sometimes you might have pest problems that will be too difficult to manage yourself. For these jobs, you should hire a professional pest control operator, who may suggest the use of a pesticide.

Pesticides are used to control pests

Pesticides are substances used to manage pests. They include insecticides used for insect control, herbicides used for weed control, and rodenticides used to kill rats and mice.

Pesticides are toxic. They need to be used with great care. If they are used carelessly they may damage the health of the person applying them or the health of other people in the community. They may also damage the environment.

Laws control use of pesticides

There are laws to control the use of pesticides. There are also certain precautions that you should try to take to minimise your exposure to these substances when you use a commercial pest control service.

How pesticides can affect your health

Pesticides can take the form of a solid, liquid, powder or spray. The form will influence the way in which the pesticide can enter your body and potentially affect your health. Pesticides can enter your body if you:

- Swallow pesticide; eat, drink or smoke after handling pesticide; or consume food or drink that was exposed to pesticide.
- Have skin contact with pesticide – directly, through pesticide-soaked clothing, or by touching pesticide-treated surfaces.
- Inhale pesticide vapours, sprays or dust.
- Rub your eyes after handling pesticide or in some other way cause pesticide to come into direct contact with your eyes.

If you minimise your exposure and take care when you come into contact with pesticides, you will reduce the chance of damaging your health.

Pesticide poisoning

Poisoning as a result of exposure to pesticides may occur shortly after a single exposure (acute poisoning) or gradually after repeated exposures over a period of time (chronic poisoning).

Acute poisoning

Symptoms may begin shortly after exposure and may include:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhoea
- Blurred vision
- Excessive eye watering
- Sweating
- Excess saliva.

More severe poisoning may also lead to changes in heart rate, chest tightness, muscle weakness and twitching, difficulty breathing and walking, constricted pupils and incontinence.

In very severe cases of poisoning, seizures and unconsciousness may occur.

Chronic poisoning

Symptoms may occur gradually after repeated exposures over a period of time and may include:

- Muscle weakness
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- Generally feeling unwell.

Symptoms may vary

The type of symptoms you may have, how long they last and how severe they are may vary, depending on factors such as:

- The type and concentration of the pesticide used
- The degree of exposure
- The health and age of the person exposed.

Symptoms may be due to other conditions

Many of the potential symptoms are not specific to pesticide poisoning – they may be due to other conditions, such as illness or allergy.

Some people are more likely to be affected

Although anyone may be affected by exposure to pesticides, certain groups are particularly susceptible including:

- Unborn babies and young children
- Pregnant and nursing women
- Elderly people.

Poisoning – first aid

If you or anyone in your family develops symptoms soon after exposure to pesticides:

- Contact a doctor immediately
- Call the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 131 126.

Remember to provide details of the exposure, including the product name if possible.

Safety precautions

If you use a commercial pest control operator:

- Use only a licensed pest control operator.
- Obtain the full chemical name of the pesticide to be used – in case of an emergency, this will assist with first aid.
- Ensure food, clothes, toys, toothbrushes, bedding, towels, vegetable gardens, barbecues, pet bowls, fish ponds, clotheslines and cooking utensils are covered or removed from the area to be treated.
- Relocate pets during treatment until the pesticide is dry.
- Ensure that all doors and windows are closed if the pesticide is to be applied outdoors.
- Vacate the premises while the pesticide is mixed and applied, and until the pesticide is dry. Four to six hours is generally recommended but your pest control operator will recommend the appropriate time, based on the specific treatment used.
- Ensure that all benchtops and kitchen utensils are thoroughly cleaned before any food is prepared. Ventilate the house, by opening all doors and windows, for a few hours when you return if the pesticide has been applied indoors.
- Advise your neighbours in advance of any external pesticide treatments.

Pest control operators take extra precautions, such as wearing protective clothing, because they are around pesticides all the time and are at greater risk of exposure.

Talk to the operator about any concerns

Raise any concerns, such as how the pesticide could affect pregnancy, young children or allergies, with your pest control operator before they start work. This will give them a chance to discuss treatment options with you. A good pest control operator will listen to your concerns and address them by using the most appropriate pest control method.

Pest control licensing

Due to the potential risks involved in handling pesticides, anyone who uses pesticides as part of a pest control business in Victoria is required to hold a *Licence to Use Pesticides* issued by the Department of Health Victoria.

Although pesticides are toxic and there are risks associated with pesticide use, licensed pest control operators are trained in the safe handling, storage and application of these substances. If the appropriate precautions are taken to minimise exposure to pesticides, the risk to health is greatly reduced.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Ambulance Tel. 000
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – seven days a week, 24 hours a day – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs and poisoning prevention information
- Department of Health Victoria, Pest Control Program Tel. 1300 887 090 for further information regarding the *Licence to Use Pesticides* or other information related to pesticide use in the home.

Things to remember

- Use only a licensed pest control operator.
- Ensure safety precautions are taken in order to minimise exposure to pesticides.
- If you or your family develop symptoms soon after exposure to pesticides, seek urgent medical attention.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Public Health

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