

Pesticides and Schools

Reproduced for the Green Flag Program with permission from the Green Squad, a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Healthy Schools Network.

Some areas of your school may be off-limits without permission from your teacher or principal, and some projects should be done with at least one partner. Check with your teacher before beginning any activities or projects related to this fact sheet.

Why It Matters

Pesticides are chemicals, which can spread through the air and seep into soil and water, where you might touch, breathe or drink them. They can harm plants and animals — and they can harm you, too.

Pesticides are poisons. They are powerful chemicals that kill pests, including rodents, insects and weeds. Pesticides are used indoors and outside, and even on people (to kill head lice, for instance). Often, pesticides take a long time to break down. As a result, they can stay in the environment for weeks, months or even years.

Pesticide fumes often linger in the air. Sometimes they drift into schools or are sucked in by ventilation systems. Pesticides can also be tracked into school on the bottoms of your shoes. And if you sit or play on the grass, you can breathe in pesticides or absorb them through your skin. When they're used inside, pesticides can stick to carpets, toys or cushions.

Some pesticides seep through the ground into lakes or streams, or are washed into them by rain. They can also wind up in drinking water. When pesticides spread through the environment, they harm many plants and animals — not just the ones they were designed to kill. They can also make you sick. For



instance, when you come in contact with pesticides, you might have trouble breathing, get a headache, become sick to your stomach, or get a rash or flu-like symptoms. If you're exposed to a large amount of pesticides all at once, or even just a little bit over a long period of time, they can affect your brain or nervous system. And they can even cause cancer.

What Kids Can Do

First, find out how your school gets rid of bugs, rodents and weeds, both inside and out. Ask your school's head custodian or your principal. If you find out that your school uses chemical pesticides, follow the steps below to help protect yourself. Meanwhile, urge your school to use other methods to prevent pest and weed problems. Read the next section to learn more about how schools can find safer and more effective ways to keep pests away.

- **Be on the lookout:** Look for notices telling you that your school has recently applied pesticides. If you see a notice on the grass, or around bushes, stay away from that area. Even if you don't see a sign, avoid areas where you see pesticide granules on the ground (and remind your school office to post a warning).
- **Clean up your act:** By keeping your school clean, you'll help keep pests away. Be extra careful with food, which attracts roaches, ants and other insects. Always wipe up spills and crumbs right away, and don't leave food in your locker overnight or over the weekend. Eat and drink only where you're supposed to. If you sneak food where it doesn't belong, you could be contributing to a bug problem at your school.
- **Wash up to remove pesticide traces from your skin:** If your school uses pesticides, it helps to wash your hands frequently. Washing can remove traces of pesticides, which otherwise might wind up on your books or your clothes, or even in your mouth.
- **Wipe your feet to keep traces of pesticides off your shoes:** You can track pesticides all over your school on the bottoms of your shoes. So wipe your feet whenever you go indoors.

What Your School Can Do

Pesticides aren't the only way to fight bugs, rodents or weeds. They aren't even the best way. But many school officials have a hard time kicking the pesticide habit. At some schools, using pesticides is part of the routine and no one has ever thought about how to stop. Or school officials may think that chemicals are the only way to fight pests. Some officials even think they're required to use pesticides — which simply isn't true. But things are beginning to change. Today, many states have laws limiting school pesticide use. As school officials learn more, they're turning to safer ways to deal with pests.

What are these methods? They fall into a broad category called integrated pest management or IPM. IPM stresses prevention and other non-chemical ways to control pests. The Environmental Protection Agency has an entire program at <http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/ipm/> to help school officials with IPM. Other useful resources are the University of Florida's school IPM site at <http://schoolipm.ifas.ufl.edu/index.html>, the New York Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides model school IPM policy at <http://www.crisny.org/not-for-profit/nycap/modlplan.htm> and www.beyondpesticides.org.

Here are some of the steps your school should be taking to fight rodents, insects, and weeds more safely. If it's not, speak up. Talk to your teacher or principal and get your parents involved.

Find Safer Ways to Control Pests

- **Block pests from entering or taking root:** Insects and rodents can squeeze through tiny spaces. They also like to hide and nest in cracks and crevices in the building's foundation or walls. So it's important to check windows and doors, and to look for cracks. These spaces should all be sealed so pests can't get through. Your school can block weeds, too. One way is to apply a layer of mulch (a protective covering for soil) to landscaped areas. Another method is to plant bushes and flowers close together so weeds will have less room to grow. To do this correctly, your school should use plants and methods that are suitable for your region.
- **Learn to live with weeds:** Often, outdoor pesticides are used only to make lawns or shrub beds look more uniform. But when you think about it, there's really no reason why a lawn, ballfield or playground has to be just grass — especially when keeping it that way requires using dangerous chemicals. And anyway, who says weeds are so bad? Dandelions are safe, and so is clover.
- **Fight pests without using chemicals:** It's possible to keep almost all pests away without using chemicals. Other methods work just as well or even better. For instance, steam-cleaning areas where insects breed can be very effective. (The areas behind ovens or refrigerators are good places for this.) Some pests can be removed by vacuuming. Weeds in a small area can be mowed or removed by hand. (Or just leave them alone!)

If Your School Uses Pesticides, It Should Follow Healthy Practices

- Use the least harmful pesticides available: All pesticides are dangerous, but some are worse than others and should never be used. For help in learning about these chemicals (and for ideas about safer alternatives), school officials can visit Beyond Pesticide's Safety Source for Pest Management at <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/infoservices/pcos/index.htm>. The Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides' publications page at <http://www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html> offers fact sheets on specific chemicals. Its guide Researching Health Effects of Pesticides on the Web at <http://www.pesticide.org/ResPHealth.html> offers advice on researching specific chemicals.
- Use chemical pesticides only as needed: Pesticides should be used only if a pest problem cannot be controlled by cleaning or blocking entryways that pests use — and never on a regular schedule.
- Allow only licensed professionals to apply pesticides: Only adults who are trained and licensed should apply pesticides. Never teenagers, at work, at home or at school.

- Notify students and families before applying pesticides: Students and their families should always be told before pesticides are applied. In many states, schools are required to post notices about pesticide applications. If your school doesn't notify you before applying pesticides, tell your parents. You and your family can talk to your PTA about this problem and ask your school board to set up a notification policy.
- Put mats at school entrances so people can wipe their feet: If "walk-off" mats are at all the doorways, people can easily wipe off their feet before entering school. This will help keep pesticide residues out of your school. And of course, it will also help keep the school a lot cleaner. That's why they are called "walk-off" mats, because you walk off the dirt as you go over them.

For More Information

The EPA's What is a Pesticide? website at <http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/about>

Check out the Project Ideas fact sheet for examples of activities that you can do in your school. All of these projects can go toward earning the Green Flag Award at your school.

The Green Squad is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in collaboration with the Healthy Schools Network. <http://www.nrdc.org/greensquad/> © Natural Resources Defense Council

