
Commissioner's Corner**PESTICIDE USE REDUCTION
MINIMIZING THE USE OF LAWN CHEMICALS**

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In recent years, Westchester County Executive Andy Spano and the Westchester County Health Department have taken the lead in efforts to reduce the quantity of pesticides used in the County. In 2002, Westchester County phased out the use of pesticides on its own county property and encouraged municipalities to follow its example. Through its Pest Management Committee, the County is working to encourage the use of alternatives to pesticides throughout County properties and golf courses and to identify the least toxic substances that can be used to address each problem. Through its community partner, Grassroots Environmental Inc., the County is supporting training initiatives to help landscapers learn the least toxic methods of maintaining lawns. Public awareness of pesticide use reduction is being strongly encouraged throughout the County.

These efforts have been taken in response to the fact that Westchester County has one of the highest rates of pesticide use in the New York State, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. This was a surprising finding to many Westchester residents who might have expected that the upstate counties with farmland and crops would be higher users of pesticide. But, in fact, far greater quantities of pesticides are used in Westchester for the maintenance of suburban lawns than are used elsewhere in the state for farming or crop production.

The excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers for suburban lawns can have damaging effects on the environment and raise concern about human health. Routine, seasonal applications of lawn chemicals to suburban lawns result in the excessive runoff of lawn chemicals into Westchester's recreational waters, ground water and drinking water. Environmental degradation ensues, with summer algae blooms and fish kills in the recreational waters. A growing body of scientific data is examining potential human health concerns related to exposure to pesticides. Questions must be answered as to whether these substances produce an increased risk of disorders of the endocrine system, immune system and reproductive system, as well as with certain forms of cancer, such as leukemia. Children are considered especially vulnerable to health effects from pesticide exposure, as well as from other environmental chemicals, due to their smaller body mass and rapid physiological development. The use of pesticides for the purpose of beautification of lawns and gardens should be reconsidered in light of the possible harm caused.

In addition to the acute hazards posed by direct exposure to pesticides, there is also the risk of cumulative effect from pesticides in the environment, particularly those that have entered the water supply or the food supply. While these effects are difficult to measure, they present a concern that we all need to take seriously.

Health care providers can be of great help in this effort by encouraging patients to be very cautious when using pesticides and, preferably, to avoid using them altogether. A proactive approach to health care must include support for an environment that is conducive to good health. With spring approaching, this would be a good time to make educational literature on the risks associated with pesticides available to patients.

Pesticide application is often routine and not in response to a recognized pest problem. Some alternative methods of addressing tick and mosquito problems include the following:

- Mow lawns frequently and clear leaf litter
- Plant natural insect repellent plants, such as marigolds and tansies
- Hand-pull weeds
- Use pesticide alternatives, such as insecticidal soaps and *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), which are available in garden stores.

Information on other ways to reduce the use of chemical pesticides is available on the Health Department website at <http://www.westchestergov.com/health/PesticideUseReduction.htm>. ♦