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Earlier This Season We Sprayed Our Fruit Trees With Dursban, Can We Still Eat The Fruit?

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A weekly question/answer column

Earlier This Season We Sprayed Our Fruit Trees With Dursban, Can We Still Eat The Fruit?

Howard M. Deer answers:*

When pesticides are used according to their label directions, residues are kept to a minimum, food quality and appeal increase and sprayed food products are safe to eat.

Dursban is a trade name for the pesticide chlorpyrifos and is used around homes and gardens. Lorsban is another trade name for chlorpyrifos and is mostly used on agricultural crops.

If Dursban was applied as the label instructed, your fruit should be safe to eat. In addition to applying the pesticide correctly, you must also pay attention to the "intervals to harvest" which is how long you should wait after spraying before picking the produce. This interval allows time for the pesticide to break down and decrease the residue on the fruit to a very low level.

Your question probably comes from the recent EPA decision to remove some chlorpyrifos uses. This EPA regulatory action was taken primarily to increase the level of safety and reduce potential exposures to children.

To enhance the safety of our food supply EPA removed chlorpyrifos from use on tomatoes and apples after they bloom and foliar applications on grapes — all high intake foods for children.

To reduce potential exposures to children as well as the rest of the public, EPA will prohibit the use of chlorpyrifos in and around homes, including lawns and gardens, and around schools, parks and other areas frequently used by children. Agricultural uses will see reductions in rates and in frequency of applications. Intervals to harvest and worker reentry intervals will be increased.

Residential use of containerized baits will continue as well as use in other indoor nonresidential areas where children will not be exposed, such as warehouses, manufacturing plants, food processing plants, railroad boxcars, etc. Outdoor use will continue in areas where children will not be exposed, such as golf courses, road medians, fence posts, utility polls, landscape timbers and other similar wood products. Public health uses for fire ant and mosquito control will also continue. Usage for termites around homes will gradually be phased out over the next five years starting with full barrier home post construction applications in 2002.

Foods that can still be treated include cranberries, strawberries, citrus, apples (before they bloom), figs, pears, nectarines, cherries, peaches, plums, grapes (nonfoliar), almonds, pecans, walnuts, onions, peppers, kale, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, cucurbit (gourds), asparagus, roots and tubers, corn, lentils, beans, peas, sorghum, tobacco, wheat, alfalfa, peanuts, soybeans, sunflower, cotton, sugar beets, mint, bananas and as a cattle ear tag. There are about 825 registered products containing chlorpyrifos. About half of chlorpyrifos use is in

agricultural settings and half in nonagricultural settings. An estimated 24 percent of all use of chlorpyrifos is as a termiticide.

All of the regulatory actions have different time frames for implementation to take effect, but all will be completed by the end of 2005.

Reports from some government agencies and retailers indicate that there is some confusion about what to do with chlorpyrifos products on hand. Use was not prohibited for already purchased products and there is no recall of products. People can use what they have according to label directions. There is concern that many people are going to discard their chlorpyrifos products into the trash, which means the insecticide will end up in the landfill. If this happens with large numbers of containers all over the United States, you can end up with more pollution than if the product was used as it was supposed to be.

The recommended method of disposal for pesticides is to use it all according to directions on the label rather than throw it into the trash. This distributes the pesticide at a low rate evenly over a large area. Then, sunlight, microorganisms, moisture and other environmental chemicals can break down the pesticide molecules and decrease the toxicity to that of carbon dioxide, sulfur, phosphorous, chlorine and nitrogen, which are already major components of our environments.

You can continue to purchase and use Dursban and other chlorpyrifos products as instructed on the label until supplies are no longer available or the manufacture has been stopped. With careful use you should be able to realize the benefits that the product has to offer and avoid the inherent risks that come with using pesticides.

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