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CHILDREN ARE FACING HIGH RISKS FROM PESTICIDE POISONING

Better protection and awareness raising needed, UN agencies say

Geneva - Children are facing higher risks from pesticides than adults and need greater protection against these chemicals, particularly in developing countries, according to a joint report published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Pesticide poisoning is a serious health problem that disproportionately affects infants and children, the UN report, called "Child Pesticide Poisoning: Information for Advocacy and Action" and issued this week in Geneva, said. The number of children affected is unknown but, based on the experience of many countries, likely to be large. The report highlights both the magnitude of the problem and the need to put more efforts into better reaching and helping the rural, disadvantaged populations who are most affected by pesticide poisoning.

Pesticide poisoning

It has been reported that an estimated one million to five million cases of pesticide poisonings occur every year, resulting in several thousands of fatalities, including children, the report said.

"Most of the poisonings take place in rural areas of developing countries, where safeguards typically are inadequate or lacking altogether. Although developing countries use 25% of the world's production of pesticides, they experience 99% of the deaths due to pesticide poisoning," the report said.

Children face a higher risk from pesticides because they may be more susceptible than adults or more greatly exposed than adults, the report said. Children's behaviour, playing and ignorance of risks, result in greater potential for exposure. Malnutrition and dehydration increase their sensitivity to pesticides. Currently around 200 million children are suffering from malnutrition.

Pesticide poisoning can occur via breathing, drinking or eating, or through the skin or mucous membranes. The symptoms resulting from acute poisoning may range from fatigue, dizziness, nausea and vomiting, to respiratory and neurological effects that may be life-threatening. Chronic, and even low-level exposure to pesticides has been linked to cancer, birth defects, and damage the nervous and the functioning of the endocrine system.

Sources of exposure

Diet can be a major source of exposure for children. As they grow, children drink more water and eat more food, per body weight, than do adults. Water and food containing pesticide residues may therefore be a source of chronic, low-level or high-level pesticide exposure.

Growing food on or near contaminated soils, using contaminated water on crops or for washing puts people – and children – at particular risk.

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When a mother to be is exposed to pesticides, the child becomes exposed as well, before birth, while still in the womb. Small children can also come into contact with persistent and bio-accumulative pesticides through breast feeding. Protecting pregnant women and lactating mothers from exposure to toxic contaminants is therefore crucial.

Pesticides used in the field or in the household are often stored improperly in or around farmers' homes where family members can easily access them. These toxic substances may contaminate food or water and cause air pollution. In some instances, the empty pesticide containers are reused to store water and food.

Children tend to explore their immediate environment, play close to the ground and put things in their mouths. As a consequence, they may receive significant doses of pesticides from soils, dusts and contaminated objects that can be found in rural areas, homes or gardens.

Poverty

Poverty can put children in potentially high-risk situations. In poor families, children often help out on family farms where pesticides are used. Pesticide users, including teenagers, may lack access to protective equipment such as gloves and masks, and receive no training. As a result, pesticides are often being used by young workers carelessly, and without protection.

In many developing countries, the marketing and advertisement of pesticides is often uncontrolled or illicit. Misbranded or unlabelled formulations, including ready-made solutions in soft drink bottles and other unlabelled liquid containers, are sold at open stands. Low retail prices promote pesticide use but weak legislation and inadequate law enforcement fail to control risks.

Minimizing the risk

To reduce pesticide poisoning, FAO, UNEP and WHO urge:

- to reduce and eliminate possible sources of pesticide exposures to children at home and at work;
- to keep pesticides out of children's reach and store them securely in containers that are properly labelled and use child-proof tops;
- to reduce the use of agricultural pesticides through Integrated Pest Management (IPM);
- to train health care providers on the recognition and management of pesticide poisoning;
- to provide training for people on how to use pesticides judiciously and how to prevent exposure;
- to run information and education campaigns via TV and radio programmes;
- to reduce the risks associated with the use of pesticides through a comprehensive life-cycle approach, i.e. addressing all aspects of pesticide management from manufacturing until use or disposal following the FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides.

Two key international conventions are aiming at reducing the adverse health and environmental aspects of pesticides: The *Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants* (POPs), created to reduce and eliminate 12 POPs of which nine are pesticides, and the *Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade*. The Rotterdam Convention facilitates information exchange on a broad range of potentially hazardous chemicals and gives importing countries the power to decide whether or not they want to receive future imports of certain chemicals.

The first ministerial conference of the Rotterdam Convention ends today in Geneva.

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