2,4-D

general fact sheet

NATIONAL PESTICIDE INFORMATION CENTER

What is 2,4-D?

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2,4-D is an herbicide that kills plants by changing the way certain cells grow. 2,4-D comes in several chemical forms, including salts, esters, and an acid form. The toxicity of 2,4-D depends on its form. The form also affects what will happen to 2,4-D in the environment and what impacts it may have, especially on fish. 2,4-D is used in many products to control weeds, and it is often mixed with other herbicides in these products.

2,4-D was first used in the United States in the 1940s. Agent Orange, an herbicide used during the Vietnam War, contained both 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. Dioxin, a by-product of 2,4,5-T, led to the ban of Agent Orange.

What are some products that contain 2,4-D?

Products containing 2,4-D may be liquids, dusts, or granules. The liquid forms may be concentrated or ready-to-use. There are over a thousand products with 2,4-D in them that are sold in the United States.

IMPORTANT: Always ***follow label instructions*** and take steps to ***avoid exposure***. If any exposures occur, be sure to follow the First Aid instructions on the product label carefully. For additional treatment advice, contact the Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222. If you wish to discuss a ***pesticide problem***, please call 1-800-858-7378.

How does 2,4-D work?

2,4-D kills broadleaf weeds but not most grasses. 2,4-D kills plants by causing the cells in the tissues that carry water and nutrients to divide and grow without stopping. Herbicides that act this way are called auxin-type herbicides.

How might I be exposed to 2,4-D?

Products with 2,4-D may be used on farms, home lawns, roadsides, industrial areas, and pastures. You may be exposed if you are applying 2,4-D and you get it on your skin, breathe it in, or eat or smoke afterwards without washing your hands. You also may be exposed if you touch plants that are still wet with spray. You can limit exposure by following the label carefully if you are using products that contain 2,4-D. You can also stay away from grass or plants that have been treated until the leaves are dry.

What are some signs and symptoms from a brief exposure to 2,4-D?

Pure 2,4-D is low in toxicity if eaten, inhaled, or if it contacts the skin, and some forms are low in toxicity to the eyes. However, the acid and salt forms of 2,4-D can cause severe eye irritation. People who drank products containing 2,4-D vomited, had diarrhea, headaches, and were confused or aggressive. Some

people also had kidney failure and skeletal muscle damage. People who spilled 2,4-D on their skin developed skin irritation. Breathing 2,4-D vapors can cause coughing, a burning feeling in the airway, and dizziness.

Pets may be exposed to 2,4-D if they touch grass or other plants still wet from spraying and then groom their feet or fur, if they drink the pesticide, or possibly if they eat grass that has been treated with 2,4-D. Dogs may be more sensitive to 2,4-D than other animals. Dogs and cats that ate or drank products with 2,4-D in them developed vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, lethargy, drooling, staggering, or convulsions. See the fact sheet about Pets and Pesticide Use for more information.

What happens to 2,4-D when it enters the body?

In humans, 2,4-D is not absorbed well through the skin or lungs, but it is absorbed into the body if swallowed. Sunscreen, insect repellents, and drinking alcohol may increase how much 2,4-D is absorbed through the skin. Once inside, 2,4-D moves throughout the body but does not build up in any tissues. The human body gets rid of most of the 2,4-D in the urine without changing it into anything else. More than 75% of the absorbed 2,4-D leaves the body in the first 4 days after exposure.

Is 2,4-D likely to contribute to the development of cancer?

Scientists have not found a clear link between 2,4-D and cancer in people. Because 2,4-D is often mixed with other herbicides, it is difficult to tell if 2,4-D or one of the other herbicides might be linked to cancer. Some studies have suggested that there may be links between non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and exposure to 2,4-D by itself, but other studies have not found any evidence of this.

In 2004, the EPA decided that 2,4-D could not be classified with regard to its ability to cause cancer because there was not enough data.

Has anyone studied non-cancer effects from long-term exposure to 2,4-D?

Animals fed high doses of 2,4-D for several weeks sometimes had fewer young or the young did not have normal skeletons. This only happened if the amount of 2,4-D fed to the mothers was enough to affect the mothers. 2,4-D has not been linked to health problems in human mothers or infants.

Are children more sensitive to 2,4-D than adults?

While children may be especially sensitive to pesticides compared to adults, there are currently no data to conclude that children have increased sensitivity specifically to 2,4-D.

What happens to 2,4-D in the environment?

2,4-D goes through different changes in the environment depending on its form. Most of the time, 2,4-D breaks down in soil so that half of the original amount is gone in 1-14 days. This breakdown time is called the "half-life" of the pesticide. One form of 2,4-D, the butoxyethyl ester, had a much longer half-life in aquatic sediment of 186 days.

2,4-D is broken down by bacteria in water and in soil. Water alone can also break down 2,4-D. 2,4-D has been found at low levels in shallow groundwater and streams in both rural and urban areas.

Can 2,4-D affect birds, fish, or other wildlife?

How 2,4-D affects animals and plants depends on the form of 2,4-D. Some of the ester forms of 2,4-D can be very toxic to fish and other aquatic life. The salt forms may be only slightly toxic to aquatic animals. Aquatic animals are more sensitive to 2,4-D as water temperature rises. 2,4-D may be moderately toxic to practically non-toxic to birds if they eat it. Eggs sprayed with 2,4-D still hatched and the chicks were normal. 2,4-D is practically non-toxic to honeybees. It is not expected to be a hazard to other beneficial insects.

Where can I get more information?

NPIC aims to use the best scientific resources available at the time fact sheets are written. NPIC does not have the resources to keep all of its fact sheets entirely up to date. All NPIC documents indicate when the material was last updated. For more information on how NPIC selects scientific resources, visit our web page Writing NPIC Fact Sheets.

For more detailed information visit the list of referenced resources, call NPIC at 800-858-7378, or email us at npic@oregonstate.edu. NPIC provides objective, science-based answers to questions about pesticides.

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