

IS IT SAFE?

Tips for Talking About Pesticide Risk with the Public

As a pest control professional, people trust you with their safety. People may ask “Is that pesticide safe, or is it toxic?” While you may be tempted to say “it’s safe”, that may be interpreted to mean many different things.

Question: Is it safe?

If you answer:

“It’s so safe you can drink it.”

“It’s safe, trust me.”

“It’s non-toxic, all natural.”



The client may think:

No precautions are necessary.

I don’t need to do anything.

Natural products can’t hurt me.

Imagine if you were asking your doctor about the safety of a new drug. It may satisfy you to hear the doctor say, “It’s safe.” However, you may want to know about the potential risks and precautions in order to feel satisfied that you’re getting the whole story from your doctor. Similarly with a new pest control treatment, a client may want to know about potential risks and precautions. At NPIC, we hear callers often say that they don’t have enough information to feel comfortable with the treatment. We also hear situations where precautions were not taken because the potential hazards were not conveyed. This can be negative for your business and potentially risky for your clients.

So, how can you answer the question, “Is it safe?”

1. Ask questions and listen

Many people have specific reasons why they are concerned whether it be for their children, pets, or the environment. Listening and asking questions about their concerns shows that you care about safety. It can also help you identify where you might need to take additional precautions.

2. Discuss the level of risk, rather than safety

Every pesticide is toxic if the exposure level is high enough. Therefore, no pesticide is entirely safe. Safety is based on each individual’s level of risk tolerance and is subjective. When you are talking to the public, consider quickly explaining why it’s better to talk about the level of risk.

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Consider using the following phrases in order to reframe the question, "Is it Safe?"

"Well it's not safe for the bugs! It's designed to be toxic, so it's not 100% safe. However, your risk is low, and we can take steps to make it even lower."

"There is always risk associated with any pesticide application, but your safety is our top priority. Let's talk about your concerns, and the toxicity of the chemical, and then we can go over steps we have taken to minimize any risks."

"I don't want to give you the impression that no precautions are necessary, so I won't say it is 100% safe. If you follow the instructions we talked about, the risk will be very low."



3. Discuss potential risks and optional precautions using the risk equation:

$$\text{Toxicity} \times \text{Exposure} = \text{Risk}$$

Toxicity

You can discuss product toxicity using the [signal word](#), or product [SDS](#). NPIC also maintains a library of [active ingredient fact sheets](#). Consider discussing potential side effects from an extreme exposure so they can know what to look out for.

Exposure

People are more willing to accept a risk they feel they can control. Provide some optional ideas they can use to control the risk by [minimizing their exposure](#).

4. Refer people to NPIC. 1-800-858-PEST (7378)

Sometimes clients have persistent questions about risk and they might be more comfortable talking to an objective third party. Consider referring these clients to NPIC at Oregon State University. NPIC Specialists are trained to tackle questions on challenging topics like cancer, pregnancy, and environmental impacts in an unbiased, science-based fashion. Call and test our services for yourself.

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Communicate Your Pest Management Approach

People often want to know that the treatment you have chosen is the most effective option that meets their standard of safety. In order to meet this demand, some businesses use [Integrated Pest Management \(IPM\)](#). IPM includes techniques like sanitation, monitoring, and exclusion, using pesticides as a last resort. Research indicates that IPM methods, including low toxicity pesticides, can be more effective than pesticides alone.



Better control + lower risk = more satisfied customers

Remove food, shelter, and water

Monitor for pests

Block entry points

Choose low risk products



IPM Toolbox

As a pest management professional, you may already be an expert on IPM strategies for the [pests](#) you deal with regularly. If so, consider sharing your approach with your client. New effective IPM strategies for control are constantly being researched. Consider staying up-to-date with some of latest effective IPM techniques by contacting your [local extension office](#).

Conclusion:

You can build your trust and reputation with clients and members of the public by answering the question, "Is it safe?" in a thorough and thoughtful way. Much like a doctor who describes the potential risks and optional precautions for medicine, you can provide information about a pesticide's toxicity and precautions without causing undue alarm. If time is short, or the questions become too long, give people the toll-free number for NPIC: 1-800-858-7378.