

Exposure to pesticides linked to mild learning problems

SOURCE: The Lancet 2000;356:912-913.

NEW YORK, Sep 11 (Reuters Health) - Farmers and gardeners exposed to pesticides on a regular basis may be at five times or more the risk of developing subtle neurological impairments or learning problems categorized as mild cognitive dysfunction (MCD), researchers in the Netherlands report in the September 9th issue of The Lancet.

"Our findings suggest that people who are frequently exposed to pesticides, such as arable farmers and gardeners, may have a higher risk of developing MCD," according to Dr. H. Bosma of Maastricht University and colleagues.

For the purposes of this study, MCD included problems with verbal learning, word fluency and recall, among others. Cognitive functioning was assessed using standard testing.

The investigators evaluated exposure histories for 791 individuals. "Of the 17 people who reported pesticide exposure, six (35%) had mild cognitive dysfunction at baseline, whereas only 85 (11%) of 774 individuals in the unexposed group had MCD," the researchers write.

The risk of MCD was not increased in people exposed to metals or organic solvents, Bosma and colleagues add, nor did the various exposures seem to have interactive effects with each other.

The study authors conclude that additional larger studies are needed to more accurately evaluate the risk of these types of pesticide exposures leading to subtle cognitive impairments.