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Do Pesticides Cause Skin Cancer?

A recent study conducted by the United States Health Department, the United States' National Cancer Institute and the University of Iowa suggested that there may be a link between skin cancer and exposure to pesticides. The study looked at a range of pesticides used by farmers and any associated cancers suffered by those farmers.

Unfortunately, there is a fundamental flaw in the logic and design of this research. Just because some US farmers are more frequently exposed to pesticides and suffer from higher rates of skin cancer does not mean that one causes the other. There may be other factors at play.

In this particular study, there are significant factors that were not taken into account that seriously undermine the results of this study.

Most importantly, it needs to be recognised that farmers in the US, like in Australia spend much more time outside than many other people. This exposes them to much higher doses of UV light from the sun. UV radiation is a well known and significant risk factor for skin cancer. It would be expected that as farmers spend more time in the sun than others that they would be at a higher risk of skin cancer. This additional element was not taken into account when conducting the study.

Indeed, the authors of the research themselves have admitted that "Since farmers spend a great deal of time in the sun, we cannot rule out the possibility that these pesticides specific results are driven by sun exposure". Currently only two of the chemicals identified in the study are able to be used in Australia. Neither of these (carbamate and mancozeb) have been identified by the International Agency for Cancer Research (IARC) as human carcinogens.

Sun exposure remains the greatest risk factor for skin cancer, and while farmers should always follow the label and follow safety directions when using pesticides, they should not be alarmed that their responsible use of these pesticides puts them at any additional risk from skin cancer.

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