

Cocktail of Pesticide Residues in Fruit and Vegetables Given to Schoolchildren

Traces of 123 pesticides, including those linked to cancer, hormone disruption and damage to brain development, have been found in fresh produce supplied to primary school children through a government scheme aimed at promoting healthy eating habits. CATHERINE EARLY reports

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A government-funded scheme providing free fruit and vegetables to all four to six-year olds in the country sounds like a health win. However, research by campaigners at Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) has revealed that the produce supplied may not be as healthy as it seems.

The research analysed the government's own data from regular testing of fruit and vegetables by the Expert Committee on Pesticide Residues in Food (PRiF). In two thirds of the samples tested, residues of more than one pesticide were detected, with some individual samples containing as many as thirteen different chemicals.

PAN UK is particularly concerned about this, as it says there has been little research on the combined effect of ingesting multiple pesticides on humans, particularly children, and almost no understanding of the long-term effects on health. Levels of residues are restricted by government, but this only covers pesticides used individually, the organisation said.

Multiple pesticide residues

Children are one of the groups most vulnerable to the impacts of pesticides as their bodies are still forming and pesticide exposure can interfere with the development of particular organs, PAN UK said. In addition, the capacity of children's bodies to break down toxins is far less developed than that of adults.

Imazalil, a 'probable carcinogen' and developmental toxin, was the most frequently detected pesticide. Second most frequent, and present in a fifth of all samples, was chlorpyrifos, which has been found to have negative impacts on children's cognitive development. The substance is approved only for extremely limited use in the UK, and from 2018 will be totally banned from 2018.

The fruit and vegetables given to children through the scheme were found to have higher levels of residues than those available to the public in supermarkets, PAN UK found. Multiple pesticide residues were found in ninety per cent of apples given out in schools, compared with 60 per cent in mainstream apples.

Protecting children from pesticides

PAN UK wants the government to change its approach, and give schoolchildren organic produce. It estimates that this would cost 1p extra per child per day, totalling £5.6 million on top of the £40 million the scheme currently costs.

New agricultural policy being drawn up for when the UK leaves the EU could provide an opportunity to move away from pesticides and promote British organic produce, PAN UK said.

The group says it is very supportive of the principle of giving free fruit and vegetables to children, and does not want parents to stop their children eating it. However, it wants to raise awareness of the information, which is “currently buried in technical reports” on the PRiF’s website, and is encouraging parents and schools to lobby the Department of Health to do more to protect children from pesticides.

“This scheme is for four to six year-olds, we should be giving them the very best,” said Nick Mole, policy officer at PAN UK. “It just shows a lack of concern to do things properly.”

PAN UK says it has tried to get the issue of pesticides on the department’s radar for many years, but it has refused to engage.

[Lord O’Shaughnessy](#), parliamentary under secretary of state for health, told PAN UK that pesticides “did not fall under the department’s policy area”, when the organisation requested a meeting to discuss their health impacts in July.

In a statement, the Department of Health said:

“The PAN report notes the presence of pesticide residues, but just because a residue is present does not mean that it is harmful to health.”

Legal restrictions on pesticide residue levels are set significantly below a level that could represent a risk to health, and the most sensitive people are taken into consideration when setting them, the department added.

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