

FARM WORKER ISSUES: HEALTH AND SAFETY

Farm work is hard work. Farm workers perform repetitive picking motions, bend over for hours at a time, lift heavy buckets of produce, and operate machinery like tractors, pesticide applicators, and fruit pickers that can lead to mishaps and injuries on the job.

For these and other reasons, agricultural is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), in 2016, 417 farmers and farm workers died from a work-related injury, resulting in a fatality rate of 21.4 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Long Hours of Hard Work Under a Hot Sun

In addition to physically demanding labor and dangerous machinery, heat and sun exposure make agricultural work especially dangerous. When farm workers work all day under the sun without taking adequate water or shade breaks, they face heat-related illnesses such as nausea, dizziness, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, and even death.

Among farm workers, heat stroke is the leading cause of work-related death. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), farmworkers die from heat-related illness at a rate 20 times greater than the rest of the U.S. civilian workers, and a total of 423 workers were reported to die from exposure to environmental heat between 1992 and 2006.

By law, the only state that requires water and shade breaks is California. Even in California, though, these laws do not do enough to protect workers. According to [Mother Jones](#): “On a 106-degree day in June 2016, a 54-year-old Mexican farmworker removing netting from nectarine trees suffered convulsions. He died four weeks later. Cal/OSHA cited the employer, a farm labor contractor, for six heat violations and assessed penalties of \$33,740.” In 2016, the Cal/OSHA agency reported that only about 74 percent of the agricultural employers complied with the Heat Illness Prevention standard.

Farmworkers are more vulnerable to heat related illnesses when their employers do not provide them with cold, potable water and disposable cups, as required by law. Furthermore, because [farm workers usually get paid by piece](#), they face economic pressure to skip shade or water breaks in order to earn more money.

Green Tobacco Sickness

In addition to exposure to the hot sun, sometimes even the crops that farm workers harvest can make farm workers sick. For instance, tobacco harvesters, many in North Carolina, face a unique type of illness called Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS). Caused by absorbing a high level of dissolved nicotine through the skin, which happens when workers touch wet tobacco leaves,

this illness is characterized by nausea, vomiting, weakness, dizziness, and sometimes an increase in blood pressure and heart rate.

According to the study "[Green Tobacco Sickness in Children and Adolescents](#)": "Moisture on tobacco leaves from dew or rain may contain as much as 9 mg of dissolved nicotine per 100 ml of dew, roughly equivalent to the nicotine content of six average cigarettes. On a humid day, especially after a recent rain, the average fieldworker may be exposed to as much as 600 ml of dew."

In a vicious cycle, because exposure to high levels of nicotine increases body temperature, tobacco farm workers are thus even more vulnerable to heat related illness and heat stroke.

Toxic Pesticides

While Green Tobacco Sickness is specific to tobacco harvesters, a rampant problem amongst the majority of farm workers is exposure to toxic chemicals from pesticides. Pesticides—chemicals used to kill pests such as insects, weeds, fungi, or even rodents—are sprayed onto agricultural crops to combat infestations and increase crop production.

Pesticides can be harmful to humans depending on the toxicity of the ingredients, length of time of exposure, and how it enters the body. Farm workers face pesticide exposure both directly and indirectly.

Directly, farm workers can get sprayed while they're picking crops, and they can also be made to re-enter the fields prematurely after the fields have been sprayed, thus getting unsafely exposed to high levels of pesticides.

Indirectly, farm workers are exposed by handling pesticide containers (warning labels of which are still not required to be written in Spanish in addition to English), having skin contact with pesticide residue, when the grower fails to provide water for workers to wash their hands and clothes—a common occurrence, and breathing in "pesticide drift" when the wind spreads chemicals from the crops to neighboring communities.

In this sense, farm workers have no escape from exposure, as pesticides can literally follow them home after work in the form of residue on their clothes, or pesticide drift contaminating the air in their neighborhoods.

Pesticide exposure is linked to all kinds of medical and health issues, including but certainly not limited to reproductive problems, birth defects, Alzheimer's, diabetes, cancer, autism, and memory loss. [Women are especially vulnerable to the damaging effects of pesticide exposure.](#)

Barriers to Accessing Health Care

The dangerous nature of agricultural work creates a disproportionate number of work-related health concerns for farm workers as compared to other jobs. These include the multiple medical conditions surrounding arduous manual labor, heat and sun exposure, and pesticide-related illnesses. Farm workers lack preventative healthcare and, unfortunately, they also face disproportionately large hurdles in accessing the health care they need.

According to a study by [Health Outreach Partners](#), 67% of those polled reported lack of transportation as the biggest barrier to accessing healthcare amongst high-risk populations. Because many farm workers live and work in rural communities, they have little to no options for public transportation, and thus could not access healthcare facilities even if they were eligible.

Eligibility is another issue, as documentation status can prevent workers from accessing healthcare. In addition to fear and discrimination caused by immigration status, lack of information exacerbates the problems. Farm workers and migrant health professionals report a lack of awareness of available health services, along with confusion in navigating healthcare providers and public insurance programs. This leads to farm workers waiting until their health problems are unbearable to seek medical attention.

Opportunities for Accessing Health Care

One workable solution to the problem of lack of health care is for farm workers and their families to gain benefits under a union contract. This is often the case when the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) and other unions negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. For instance, under the 2018 UFW/D'Arrigo contract, 1,550 D'Arrigo employees in the Salinas and Imperial Valleys gained a family medical, dental and vision plan, 100-percent covered by the company.

An Issue of Justice

Farm workers work hard in the fields to support themselves and their families as well as to put food on our plates and support our billion-dollar agricultural industry. They deserve access to medical services that address their multiple work-related health concerns. Additionally, farm workers deserve stronger workplace protections, such as water and shade breaks and protection from pesticides.

Pesticide exposure amongst farm workers is an issue of environmental injustice. It's one thing to worry about eating a piece of produce that's been sprayed with pesticides; farm workers are exposed to pesticides all day long, without the choice or ability to avoid exposure, and without a voice in the decisions about pesticide rules and regulations that directly affect the health of their bodies and families.

For this reason, farm workers and environmental justice organizations are leading campaigns to document cases of pesticide exposure, ban the use of some of the most dangerous pesticides that are actively used in this country, and educate others about the dangerous of pesticide exposure and its effects on farm worker communities.

For sources and to learn more:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- “How Heat Kills Farmworkers,” Mother Jones, September 2017
- Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP), “Children in the Fields”
- Health Outreach Partners
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2010
- The Ecologist, “Chemical Warfare: the Horrific Birth Defects Linked to Tomato Pesticides”
- Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)
- Health Outreach Partners (HOP), “Breaking Down the Barriers: A National Needs Assessment on Farmworker Health Outreach”
- Oxfam America and FLOC, “A state of fear: Human rights abuses in North Carolina’s tobacco industry”
- Pesticide Action Network of North America (PANNA)
- United Farm Workers (UFW)

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