



# Reducing Our Fears: Pesticides Are Medicines, Too

The Turf Resource Center

*Editor's Note: The Reinders Turf Conference is around the corner, and as I read a note Ed Devinger sent me about the dates, I got to thinking about the conference two years ago. One of the most interesting lectures was given by Michigan State's Dr. Joe Vargas. In that lecture, he pointed out some interesting facts about pesticides and medicines. After that lecture, I noticed his remarks appeared in a number of publications. I have decided to do that here, sharing with you an article with that information from the Turf Resource Center in Rolling Meadows, Illinois.*

If your child's school informed you that there was an incidence of head lice in the classroom and suggested that you treat your child's hair, you would probably go to the drug store, buy a shampoo containing an insecticide and wash your child's hair. There would be no hesitation or second thoughts. You wouldn't consider whether you or your child should wear protective clothing. It's a medicine.

If you suffer from athlete's foot, a common treatment is to rub the affected area with a cream that contains micotin or miconazol, medicine know to relieve the symptoms. Again, few people would hesitate to use the ointment because it's known as a medicine.

To protect your family dog from fleas, you might put a special collar on the dog that will ward off fleas. While we may not think of the collar as a form of medicine, neither do we hesitate to play with the dog, nor do we have a serious concern about the effects of the collar on the dog's health.

Miticides, fungicides and insecticides used to treat people or pets are generally thought of as useful, beneficial and helpful. We call them medicines.

Why then, when a product with the same active ingredient is used to treat mites, diseases and insects on grass or trees do many people think of it as dangerous, health-threatening pesticides?

Are medicines good for us and pesticides bad for us?

That's the perception held by many people, yet according to Dr. J.M. Vargas, a professor of Botany and Plant Pathology at Michigan State University for the past 25 years, the reality is that many "medicines" and "pesticides" use the identical chemical ingredients. He is concerned that the word "pesticide" attaches unfounded fears to products that are as useful and beneficial to plants as "medicine" products are to people. Dr. Vargas points out, "The drugs that we call medicines are really human pesticides. It doesn't matter if a bacterium or fungus is attacking a human or a plant; if you are going to control it, you have to use a chemical to kill the pathogen. Whether you call this chemical a medicine or pesticide technically doesn't matter, but it does as far as the public perception is concerned."

Some of his surprising examples of ingredients that are common to medicines and pesticides include the common

use of a cream to control athlete's foot that contains mycotin or myconasol, the same active ingredient that is used to control fungal diseases in turfgrass. Lindane is the medicine used to control human body lice and it is the same ingredient used to control spider mites in plants. Another of Dr. Vargas' examples is the widespread use of dog collars containing carbaryl to control fleas, yet some pet owners have a fear of exposing their pet to a yard treated with the same chemical used to treat the lawn for insects. Pneumonia, strep throat and tuberculosis are controlled by antibiotics such as streptomycin and oxytetracycline, yet according to Dr. Vargas, while we will put these materials into our bodies through our digestive tract and veins, we would be required by law to wear a respirator and protective clothing to apply them in our yards.

While not suggesting that pesticides are always safe, Dr. Vargas believes that some in the media have unnecessarily scared the public through a lack of scientific understanding and accurate reporting. ♣

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