



Pesticides Are Not the Main Problem

By Michael Fumento

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(Arlington, Va.) It's such an old joke that it's lost its humor, but it makes a point. A drunk is looking for his wallet at night at the base of a street lamp. Asked if he's sure that's where he dropped it, he says, "No, but the light is better here."

Good thing you didn't laugh, because the story also illustrates a serious problem. The Environmental Protection Agency established a panel last year to assess the most important children's health issues today. But the panel has thus far ignored many of the largest problems, focusing instead on familiar areas that are already under the spotlight.

The shortest list of our children's problems should include [obesity](#), poor nutrition and asthma. Yet the E.P.A.'s Children's Health Protection Advisory Committee included only asthma on its top-five list. Instead, the panel has adopted essentially the agenda that alarmist environmental groups wanted it to take, emphasizing the dangers of pesticides as the greater enemy.

That might be what's to be expected from an agency with the word "environmental" in its name, but the problems facing American children are not so easily pigeonholed. What seem like solutions from a narrow environmental viewpoint could be distractions from other, more important issues – and in fact could hurt children's health.

Consider the problem the E.P.A. seemed to have gotten right – asthma. Asthma is growing at a terrible rate: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 15 million Americans now suffer from it, with the number of doctor's office visits resulting from the disease doubling between 1975 and 1995. Blacks are hit hardest of all. Their hospitalization rate for asthma was more than three times that of whites, their death rate from the disease more than seven times higher.

The E.P.A. blames air pollution for the increase in incidence of asthma, because bad air quality – from pollution or cigarette smoke, for example – can aggravate the symptoms of asthmatics. Yet its own data show that air pollution levels have steadily declined as the disease has skyrocketed. A study published recently in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, looked at the hospital admissions records for 460,000 children in 56 countries and found that asthma rates were highest in countries with the least air pollution.

Blaming air pollution "is political, not medical," says Dr. David Rosenstreich, the primary author of a study on the causes of asthma that was published last year in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. His team found that the disease's primary cause in American inner cities – where asthma rates are the highest – is actually the inhalation of dried cockroach excrement. Indeed, Dr. Margaret Heagarty, a Harlem pediatrician who was a dissenting voice on the E.P.A. panel, said we should forget about air pollution and declare war on roaches instead.



Yet the E.P.A. is considering limiting or banning many organophosphates and carbamates, two types of pesticides that are potent cockroach killers. Even though 30 years' use has shown these chemicals to pose very little danger to humans, the E.P.A. committee on children has voiced concern about the use of both pesticides a campaign that can only harm children and help roaches.

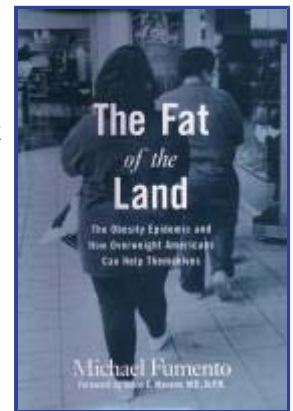
Making these insecticides the target will harm children's health in another way. Because these pesticides are vital in controlling crop-eating insects, restrictions on their use would mean that fruit and vegetable prices would probably rise.

More than 200 studies associate low consumption of fruits and vegetables with higher risk of cancer. A study published in 1995 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reported that the quarter of the population with the lowest dietary intake of fruits and vegetables – disproportionately inner-city minorities – suffers roughly twice the cancer rate of the quarter of the population that eats the most produce.

As [Bruce Ames](#), a biochemist and director of environmental health science at the University of California at Berkeley, told me, "It just doesn't make any sense to spend \$146 billion on E.P.A. regulations, a few billion on cancer treatment research, and practically nothing to get people to eat good diets."

Further, our youngsters' atrocious eating habits have led to an explosion in obesity, making American children among the fattest on earth. From 1963 to 1970, government data show only 5 percent of children ages 6 to 11 were obese. Since then, that percentage has almost tripled. For children ages 12 to 17, it has more than doubled. Again, minority groups suffer the most. Almost 19 percent of Mexican-American boys ages 6 to 11 are obese, as are 18 percent of non-Hispanic black girls in the same age group. (For more information on obesity, read Michael Fumento's book, [The Fat of the Land](#).)

Moreover, a recent Harvard study reported that one apparent cause of asthma is, yes, obesity. In the past, doctors presumed that people who have asthma become obese because the disease makes it difficult to exercise. But this study found that the heavier adults are, the more likely they are to develop asthma. The researchers who conducted the study will look at children next.

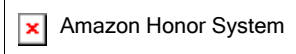
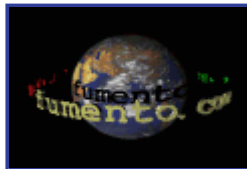


As the facts pile up, we can hope that the E.P.A. will refocus its energies on the biggest problems, rather than favoring those causes pushed by the environmental lobby.

Read Michael Fumento's additional work on [pesticides](#) and on [obesity](#).

Michael Fumento is the author of [numerous books](#), including [Science Under Siege](#).

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