Exposed To Pesticides On a Flight?

If you feel that you may be suffering from symptoms due to pesticides or any other chemical exposure in your work environment, the best thing you can do for yourself is document it.

If the aircraft was can sprayed while you were on board, write down the details. If the aircraft was residually sprayed by pesticide applicators before you boarded, check the spraying certificate before you leave the aircraft and write down the date and time when the aircraft was last sprayed. If possible, take a photo of the certificate as proof. United Airlines residually sprays its 747-400 aircraft before crew and passengers board in Hong Kong, and the spraying certificate should be posted in the first class closet. AFA does not have information on residual spraying operations at other airlines.

If you have a rash, red eyes, or other symptoms that are visible, take photos as soon as possible. Your doctor is unlikely to do this and it will help to establish the cause-effect relationship that you want to prove.

It is very important that you see a doctor as soon as possible to document your symptoms. It is especially important to have everything documented to protect yourself if your symptoms get worse. We have heard from some flight attendants who have seen a doctor for pesticide-related complaints and been sent home with antibiotics. This is unacceptable! You need to tell your doctor that you were exposed to pyrethroid pesticides on board the aircraft. Tell them how soon you boarded the aircraft after it had been sprayed. Describe the conditions in the cabin. Give them a copy of the information on the back of this form, including a reference to the CA Department of Health Services investigation.

If you think your symptoms are explained by pesticide exposure, make sure you tell your doctor. In California, doctors that "know or have reason to believe that a patient is suffering from pesticide poisoning or any disease or condition" are required to report that fact to the local county health office by telephone within 24 hours. They must also complete a Doctors First Report or a Pesticide Illness Form. Tell them to do this. In CA, it's the law. The fact that enough AFA members in CA saw enough doctors that filled out one of these forms resulted in the investigation and 2003 report by the CA Department of Health Services that has really helped make the case that the hazard of pesticides on planes has been underestimated. AFA is not aware of other states that have these reporting requirements, but it is still very important to document any symptoms by visiting a doctor. Your reports do make a difference.

File a report with the company promptly. Note the date, flight number and plane number. Describe the working conditions. Were sections of the aircraft damp or odorous when you boarded? Did you spend time in the crew rest area? During what phase of flight did you develop symptoms? Was this the first time? United Airlines flight attendants should use the company reporting system and check the ‘Copy to AFA’ box.
Keep a copy of everything – every medical record, report, and photo. Keep a record of all phone conversations – names, dates, and a short summary of the conversation. If you have to mail anything, send it by certified mail with a return receipt.

Reporting to the company is a priority, but AFA also needs written feedback. Send AFA a copy of the report you file with the company. We would appreciate it Please at least report by phone (206-932-6237) or email (judith@AFAnet.org). AFA staff member Judith Anderson is working on the pesticide issue. She wants to hear from you. Also visit http://ashd.afacwa.org under "health", "pesticides."

PESTICIDE INFORMATION FOR YOUR DOCTOR

Australia, China, Jamaica, New Zealand, and Uruguay are among the 60 countries that require aircraft to be sprayed with pesticides prior to arrival to prevent the importation of insects that could carry disease or damage agriculture or plants. A 2001 survey reported that most of these countries require that the aircraft be sprayed on a 2% solution of permethrin or d-phenothrin\(^1\).

These pesticide products also contain multiple solvents and the in-flight sprays contain a propellant. Some products also contain piperonyl butoxide\(^2\).

Pesticides cannot be sprayed on planes in the US because the Environmental Protection Agency has not registered any pesticides for this purpose\(^3\). Despite this, there is evidence that pesticides are sprayed on aircraft routed on domestic flights for general insect control. Pesticide spraying to comply with foreign quarantine regulations is done either during an international flight or during ground operations in other countries. Aircraft spraying operations are sometimes based in countries without spraying rules of their own so it is not necessary to fly to a country with spraying rules to be exposed to pesticides.

Some countries will accept arriving aircraft that were liberally sprayed in the cabin and cockpit before passengers and crewmembers boarded, typically with a solution of 2% permethrin ("residual spraying"). These aircraft can land in countries that accept residual treatment for 56 days after application. There are no protective measures to ensure that the surfaces in the cabin are dry before people board, and there is evidence that aircraft are over sprayed relative to World Health Organization recommendations. On long haul flights, crewmembers take rest breaks on bunk beds that have been sprayed with pesticides.

The alternative to residual spraying is to spray the occupied aircraft either in-flight or upon arrival, typically with a product that contains 2% d-phenothrin.

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\(^1\) This survey is available online at [http://www.icao.int/icao/en/atb/fal/panels/falp3/ip01e.pdf](http://www.icao.int/icao/en/atb/fal/panels/falp3/ip01e.pdf).


In 2003, the California Department of Health Services published a report following its investigation into occupational illness among flight attendants due to aircraft disinsection. It concluded that residual disinsection poses a health hazard to flight attendants and that current assumptions underestimate the risks⁴.

In 2002, a National Research Council committee report on aircraft air quality concluded that “sensitization, or enhanced responsiveness with successive pesticide exposures, may be a problem faced by cabin attendants because they are intermittently exposed; such an exposure regimen is ideal for inducing sensitization or magnified responses to the same exposures”⁵.

United Airlines uses an in-flight spray manufactured by Airosol on its B747-400, B777, and B767-300ER aircraft prior to arrival in Jamaica, Montevideo, Beijing, and Shanghai. United Airlines uses a residual spray manufactured by Callington Haven on its 747-400 aircraft in Hong Kong in anticipation of flying to Australia. Effective May 2004, Hawaiian Airlines uses an aircraft cabin spray manufactured by Callington Haven upon arrival in Australia. Presumably other airlines use similar products. AFA does not have specific information on the contents of the in-flight sprays applied en route to India, but India requires a spray that contains permethrin, phenothrin, and pemothren. Visit the AFA pesticides webpage via http://ashsd.afacwa.org.

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⁴ The full report is available at http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ohb/OHSEP/disinsection.pdf
⁵ The full report is available at http://www.nap.edu/books/0309082897/html/1.html (see p.204).