

PET PRODUCTS CONTAINING TOXIC CHEMICALS TO GET WARNING LABELS¹

Emily Main[©]

The American Pet Products Association estimates that 84 million homes in this country house dogs, cats, or both. That's just over half of U.S. households. So it should be concerning that all those homes could be harboring toxic pesticides that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has banned for most residential uses, but still allows on flea and tick collars. "When we've looked at pesticide use in homes, some of the most dangerous chemicals, from a public health perspective and especially a children's health perspective, were routinely found in pet products," says Miriam Rotkin-Ellman, MPH, staff scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). The chemicals she's referring to are propoxur and tetrachlorvinphos, two of the most dangerous pesticides still on the market, according to NRDC, because they have been linked to cancer and serious nerve damage.

This past week, NRDC won a lawsuit against 18 pet-product retailers and manufacturers who weren't complying with state laws that required warning labels on flea and tick collars that contain these two pesticides.

THE DETAILS: The lawsuit was filed in a California court because state law there requires that warning labels be placed on any product containing chemicals listed on the state's Proposition 65 list of chemicals known to cause cancer or reproductive harm. Propoxur has made the list, but tetrachlorvinphos has not. Under the settlement that was reached, PETCO, PetSmart and 16 other pet product companies have agreed not to sell any products containing propoxur without the required warning labels. "Under California law, manufacturers are responsible for labeling their products, and retailers are responsible for ensuring those products meet the law," Rotkin-Ellman says. "Our goal is to ensure that consumers have access to all the information they need to make choices about what they're bringing inside their homes."

The environmental nonprofit isn't stopping with the lawsuit. They currently have a campaign going to get PETCO and PetSmart to stop selling products containing the toxic chemicals altogether, and they're continuing to put pressure on the EPA to ban propoxur and tetrachlorvinphos outright.

WHAT IT MEANS: The law is aimed solely at retailers and manufacturers who sell products in California, but because that's such a huge state, it's likely that products complying with California law will wind up in stores nationwide. But that's not a guarantee. "This really speaks to why we need federal action on these chemicals," says Rotkin-Ellman. "It's not as though pet owners in other states don't need or want this information." And, she adds, in their most recent risk assessment on propoxur, the EPA concluded that products containing the chemical were too dangerous to use in homes and posed a particular threat to children, who play with pets then put their hands in their mouths.

The good news, she says, is that most flea infestations can be dealt with sans pesticides. "Basic cleaning of pets is really sufficient for managing most flea problems," she says, adding that vets have told her that flea collars aren't that effective when they are used. "So they're just toxic

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exposures that don't even work." Ticks pose a whole other set of problems, though. "We really encourage folks to use the least toxic option available for tick control," she says.

To keep your pets both tick- and flea-free without resorting to hazardous chemicals, here are some tips:

- (1) **Baths and combs are your pets' best defense.** Bathing dogs every other week is generally effective at preventing flea infestations, and it also helps to remove ticks if they haven't already latched onto a pet's skin. Flea combs are effective against fleas, and they'll help remove ticks if the ticks haven't yet latched on to your pet.
- (2) **Vacuum regularly.** Keeping your pets' bedding and favorite lounging spots vacuumed will keep fleas and ticks from crawling onto other people. Make sure you have a good vacuum cleaner and vacuum every three to four days. It's also a good idea to launder your pet's bedding weekly.
- (3) **Find less-toxic chemicals.** Since ticks can be difficult to control without chemicals, it's important to which options are safest. NRDC ranks tick chemicals for both dogs and cats based on safety, and publishes those rankings on their site, www.greenpaws.org.
- (4) **Read labels!** Rotkin-Ellman cites an EPA report that came out in March, finding that consumers frequently misused concentrated spot-on products, leading to pet poisonings. People generally used more product than was necessary for their size pet, and the information provided by manufacturers wasn't really helpful in determining the correct dosage. "Make sure you're using the least amount possible," she says. "And if you have kids, restrict access to the pet after it's treated, and encourage more-frequent handwashing." Another tip: Only use these chemicals during tick season, she says. "You don't need to treat your pet the whole year if your tick season is only a few months long."
- (5) **Take action.** You can sign a petition asking pet retailers to stop selling toxic flea collars on NRDC's Greenpaws.org website.