

## Focus on Tobacco

### Farmworkers Suffer Occupational Nicotine Poisoning

There is much attention paid today to the negative effects tobacco has on consumers. Farmworkers who handle the tobacco plant in the fields are not immune, however, to the harmful effects of the tobacco leaf. Above and beyond the widespread health problems farmworkers face from pesticide exposure, many suffer from a condition unique to the tobacco fields: green tobacco sickness (GTS).

Though not a new problem, green tobacco sickness was first documented in tobacco workers in Florida in 1970. It was found that nicotine, the major active ingredient in tobacco, is a water-soluble chemical which is easily absorbed by cultivators' bodies while they handle wet tobacco leaves. Nicotine enters workers' bodies through their skin, lungs, and gastrointestinal tracts.

The symptoms of green tobacco sickness include nausea, vomiting, dizziness, abdominal cramps, headaches, shortness of breath, weakness, and blood pressure and heart rate fluctuations. While these acute effects of the sickness last only one or two days, there may be

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### What You Need To Know About Tobacco

- ☛ Tobacco is currently grown in more than 120 countries around the world (Goodman, 1993).
- ☛ China, the world's largest producer of tobacco, grows 38% of the world's crop. Growers in the United States account for 10% of the world tobacco crop (Goodman, 1993).
- ☛ Tobacco is responsible for the livelihood of at least 100 million people worldwide, though tobacco accounts for only 0.3% of all cultivated land (Goodman, 1993).
- ☛ In the United States, 48,800 people are employed at 114 tobacco factories in 21 states. 136,000 people farm tobacco in 23 states (California Medical Society).
- ☛ Almost 900 million pounds of flue-cured tobacco were grown and sold in the United States in 1996. In North Carolina, 557 million pounds were grown (NC Cooperative Extension Service, 1997).
- ☛ Seventeen million pounds of pesticides and other chemicals were applied to North Carolina's 280,000 acres of tobacco fields in 1996 (NC Department of Agriculture, 1997).
- ☛ The cost of health care for tobacco-related diseases in 1993 was \$50 billion, or \$2.06 per pack (Center for Disease Control). This does not include the toll of occupational nicotine poisoning or green tobacco sickness.
- ☛ As Washington considers a host of tobacco legislation, growers are speaking out for monetary compensation to offset income loss due to new smoking restraints. Current proposals would give \$28 billion from settlement penalties to growers and farming interests over the next 25 years. Some of this money would help growers explore possible alternatives to tobacco (Raleigh News & Observer, 2/17/98).

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