

Iowa Farmer Today

Assess ag chemicals for summer safety

By Brandi Janssen

Jun 9, 2023



Photo courtesy I-CASH

Even though we have not yet reached the summer solstice, Memorial Day has passed and the weather certainly feels as hot and dry as August.

Schools are dismissing and farm households are shifting into the busy season with kids home and farm work in full gear. If you have kids home from school for a few months, it's a good time to take stock of household safety precautions, including assessing chemical storage.

According to the Iowa Poison Control Center, over 40% of calls to poison centers are about children under the age of six. In addition, poisonings are most likely to happen in the child's own home. On a farm, it's important to take stock of both household and farm chemicals to make sure they are out of reach and safely stored.

Correct chemical storage prolongs the shelf life as well as protecting people, pets and the environment. The label and safety data sheet will provide guidance on storage and handling procedures.

In general, all chemicals should be stored in their original containers in a cool, well-ventilated area away from direct sunlight. The original container is especially important because many liquid chemicals can resemble juice, water or soda. Never repurpose a beverage container to store a chemical.

Both farm and household chemicals should be stored in a dedicated area that is lockable and, ideally, constructed of nonflammable materials. Post emergency response numbers nearby, including the National Poison Control Center emergency number (1-800-222-1222).

Chemicals that require refrigeration should not be stored in household or office refrigerators or near food.

Farm chemicals should not be stored near seeds, protective clothing or animal feed. Storage areas should be made of chemically resistant material that is sealed to prevent absorption of hazardous chemicals. If possible, consider a secondary containment area, such as a floor barrier, to contain spills. Enforce a strict no smoking policy near any chemical storage areas.

In addition, Penn State Extension recommends careful sorting of different types of farm chemical products. This includes storing all pesticides separately from other chemicals, such as fertilizers, gasoline and other fuels. Store volatile compounds separately and locate liquid formations below dry ones. Anything in a glass container should be stored on the lowest level but off the floor.

Another best practice, particularly for farm chemicals, is appropriate warning signs. Signs not only help family members and employees identify hazards, they also help emergency responders select appropriate control, evacuation, and clean-up procedures when needed. Use the product label to find the appropriate signal word — danger, warning or caution.

A red-labeled “danger” sign means that if not avoided, the chemical will result in death or serious injury. These are the most toxic chemicals. In addition, products that are highly toxic via multiple exposure routes — ingestion, inhalation and skin absorption — must include the word “poison” and a skull and crossbones symbol.

A product that is labeled “warning” is moderately toxic and could result in death or injury.

Finally, a “caution” signal word means that the product is lower in toxicity and could cause minor or moderate injury in the case of exposure.

These signal words are printed on the front of labels in capital letters and refer to the entire product, not just the active ingredient. Always use the least toxic chemical that will accomplish the job, but use the sign that reflects the most hazardous compound in the storage space.

Finally, be aware of what to do in case of accidental exposure. Have emergency contact information, including the National Poison Control Center, at the ready. Always have a source of clean water available near farm chemicals to decontaminate skin, eyes or other exposures, as indicated by the label or safety data sheet. Remember that chemical ingestions may require a specific emergency response. Call the Poison Control Center for guidance.

Take the time now to assess your chemical storage practices so that you can spend your summer catching lightning bugs and grilling out rather than calling the Poison Control Center.

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