

# GREEN TOBACCO SICKNESS



**Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS)** is a type of nicotine poisoning caused by the dermal absorption of nicotine from the surface of wet tobacco plants. Tobacco harvesters, whose clothing becomes saturated from tobacco wet with rain or morning dew are at high risk of developing GTS. Workers can avoid getting this sickness by waiting to harvest until the tobacco leaves are dry, or by wearing a rain suit. Wet clothing that has come in contact with tobacco leaves should be removed immediately and the skin washed with warm soapy water.

Use of tobacco products such as cigarettes and smokeless tobacco, appears to reduce the risk of GTS.

In the United States, where tobacco is increasingly being farmed on large farms, seasonal or migrant farm workers are disproportionately affected by this condition. Worldwide there are an estimated 33 million tobacco farm workers, with a substantial proportion living in developing countries. A recent international review reported that between 8-89% of tobacco harvesters may be affected in the course of a season (this wide variation probably being due to differences between study methodologies as well as a range of working conditions). The long-term health outcomes for individuals exposed to nicotine transdermally for extended periods of time are not known.

While typically not life-threatening, green tobacco sickness is a **debilitating illness that causes nausea, vomiting, dizziness and, in severe cases, dehydration**. It afflicts tobacco workers when nicotine on moist tobacco leaves seeps through their pores as they hand-harvest the leaves. The symptoms typically last 12 to 48 hours.

Tens of millions of workers harvest tobacco in more than 100 countries, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, based in Rome. In one study, a quarter of tobacco workers surveyed reported having green tobacco sickness at least once.

More attention is being paid to the illness partly because the nature of tobacco production has changed. Increasingly in the U.S., tobacco is grown on larger farms, rather than the small family farms that once dominated the industry. That means more migrant workers are picking tobacco for longer periods of time, increasing their exposure.

Green tobacco sickness also is becoming a bigger global problem as tobacco production shifts to the developing world, where production costs are lower. The World Health Organization is conducting research on the health, social and environmental impact of tobacco growing in the developing world, including green tobacco sickness.

Getting the tobacco industry to acknowledge some of the risks associated with harvesting tobacco is a coup for shareholder-rights activists like Michael Crosby, who have lobbied the tobacco industry for years on topics ranging from advertising to the health effects of smoking.

Father Crosby, a Catholic priest at the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order, filed a

shareholder resolution at Philip Morris International late last year after reading about Mexican farm workers who fell ill from green tobacco sickness. The resolution demanded that the company deal with the malady “to ensure our profits and dividends are not being realized by exploiting ‘the least’ of our brothers and sisters.”

Father Crosby withdrew his resolution after Philip Morris International responded with a step-by-step response to how the company would address the problem.

The company also said in the letter that it is developing training materials that will be distributed to growers in the U.S. and internationally.

Tobacco harvesting is labor-intensive because it’s still mainly done by hand. Workers spend hours in the sun picking leaves that are then cured and processed into cigarettes. Other job-related hazards include heat stroke and pesticide exposure.

Until recently, green tobacco sickness hasn’t been taken seriously as an occupational hazard, partly because research has been scant.