Published in final edited form as:

J Allergy Clin Immunol. 2009 October ; 124(4): 852–854. doi:10.1016/j.jaci.2009.07.046.

Associations between prenatal pesticide exposure and cough, wheeze, and IgE in early childhood

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To the Editor

Occupational and agricultural studies have reported positive associations between pesticide exposure and wheeze or asthma in adults.^{1,2} Among elementary school children, exposures to herbicides, pesticides, and farm crops in the first year of life, determined retrospectively by questionnaire, were associated with asthma before age 5 years.³ In a prospective birth cohort study in California, having a mother working in agriculture was associated with increased levels of T_H2 cytokines in children at age 2 years.⁴ These associations have not been tested prospectively in children by using measured pesticide levels, nor in an urban cohort, in which residential pesticide use can be widespread.⁵ We hypothesized that measured prenatal levels of pesticide would be associated with greater wheeze and IgE production by age 5 years among inner-city children living in Northern Manhattan and south Bronx.

The Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health recruited nonsmoking African American and Dominican mothers during pregnancy as described.⁶ The organophosphates chlorpyrifos and diazinon and the pyrethroids *cis*-permethrin and *trans*-permethrin were measured in personal air samples collected from monitors worn by women for 2 days during the last trimester of pregnancy. German cockroach allergen (Bla g 2) in house dust collected prenatally and serum IgE levels (antimouse, antickroach, anti-*Dermatophagoides farinae*, anticat, antidog) at ages 2, 3, and 5 years were assessed by ELISA and ImmunoCAP, respectively, as described.⁷ Prenatal questionnaires provided demographic information, characteristics of the home environment, including exposures to environmental tobacco smoke, and mother's health information. Parental questionnaires administered every 3 months from birth to age 2 years and every 6 months thereafter, and the International Study of Asthma and Allergy in Childhood question regarding asthma over the past year (age 5 years only), were used to derive respiratory symptom categories representing symptoms over the period of the previous 12 months at 2, 3, and 5 years. The mean $\pm$ SD ages of children at the administrations

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Disclosure of potential conflict of interest: R. L. Miller receives grant support from the National Institutes of Health, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Sandeep Program for Asthma Research and is a volunteer member of the American Thoracic Society. M. S. Perzanowski receives honoraria from Indoor Biotechnologies and receives grant support from the National Institutes of Health. R. M. Whyatt receives grant support from the National Institutes of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency. G. L. Chew receives grant support from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. The rest of the authors have declared that they have no conflict of interest.

of 2-year, 3-year, and 5-year questionnaires were 2.0 ± 0.21 , 3.1 ± 0.18 , and 5.1 ± 0.67 years, respectively.

Pesticide and cockroach allergen were modeled as continuous variables after natural log-transformation. A child was considered to have wheezed (or coughed without cold) if there was any report on parental questionnaires of wheeze (or cough without cold) over the past year. A child was considered to be sensitized (dichotomous variable) if any of 5 specific IgEs measured ≥ 0.35 IU/mL.⁷ The data were analyzed for cough, wheeze, and sensitization to any of 5 allergens using generalized estimating equations in multivariable models.

We found that pesticide use prenatally (personal home use methods and/or exterminator services) was reported by 87% of families. Eighty-two percent of the homes used pesticides any time postnatally through age 5 years. Table I exhibits the geometric means and percentile concentrations of pesticides measured in prenatal air samples.

The prevalence of cough for each of the first 5 years of life was 26% (138/539), 21% (121/585), 19% (98/527), 15% (57/381), and 21% (81/379), respectively. In multivariable generalized estimating equation models that controlled for mother's asthma status, prenatal environmental tobacco smoke exposure, sex, ethnicity, child's age when the questionnaire was completed, and cockroach allergen levels (Table II), diazinon was significantly inversely associated with cough by 5 years, whereas *cis*-permethrin was positively associated with cough by 5 years. Although the prevalence of wheeze for each of the first 5 years of life was 40% (261/652), 27% (162/596), 17% (92/529), 18% (67/381), and 63% (85/134), respectively, of the pesticides tested, only diazinon had a significant association with wheeze in the children by age 5 years (Table II).

Also, in our model, controlling for mother's asthma, prenatal environmental tobacco smoke exposure, sex, ethnicity, child's age when the questionnaire was completed, and cockroach allergen levels, an inverse association between diazinon and sensitization to any of the 5 allergens tested at 2, 3, and 5 years was detected (Table II). Finally, cockroach allergen levels were correlated significantly with diazinon ($r = 0.18$; $P < .0001$), *cis*-permethrin ($r = 0.23$; $P < .0001$), and *trans*-permethrin ($r = 0.22$; $P < .0001$), but not with chlorpyrifos ($r = 0.06$; $P = .15$).

In sum, whereas higher prenatal levels of *cis*-permethrin were associated with early cough, higher levels of diazinon, paradoxically, were associated with reduced cough, wheeze, and IgE. Regarding the former finding, in animal studies, permethrins have been associated with excitatory neurotoxicity through action on voltage-sensitive sodium channels.⁸ Some pyrethroids have been reported to inhibit both IFN- γ and IL-4 production in *in vitro* studies.⁹ Sensory irritation, most likely caused by repetitive firing of sensory nerve endings,¹⁰ could result in cough. Pyrethroid-containing aerosols reportedly cause chest tightness, difficulty breathing, and cough in patients with asthma.¹¹ However, in these models, it is difficult to distinguish the independent role of prenatal exposure on later symptoms from the effects of postnatal exposures that may proxy measured prenatal exposures. The reason for the latter finding of statistically significant negative associations between diazinon and early cough and wheeze remains elusive. It did not appear to be attributed to reduced cockroach allergen levels, given the positive correlation between Bla g 2 levels in the dust and pesticide levels in air. A possible explanation for the inverse association between diazinon levels and allergic sensitization is an organophosphate-driven upregulation of T_H1 cytokine production (and thus downregulation of T_H2), some evidence for which comes from previous *in vitro* and animal model studies. Duramad et al¹² found that exposing human whole blood cell cultures simultaneously to low doses of the organophosphate chlorpyrifos (or its metabolite, chlorpyrifos oxon) and to LPS resulted in the production of significantly higher levels of IFN-

γ compared with cells receiving LPS alone. Coincubation with dust mite allergen (Der p 1) did not induce additional T_H2 cytokine IL-4 production. In a study in which rats received inhaled doses of the organophosphate insecticide dichlorvos, IFN- γ levels also increased in lung tissue.¹³ However, these findings contrast with those from agricultural communities in California, in which children of mothers employed in agricultural jobs, and thus exposed to (mainly organophosphate) pesticides, were more likely to have an increased T_H2 phenotype by age 2 years.⁴

A limitation of repeated-measures analysis is the assumption that wheeze or allergic sensitization at one age has similar meaning at a later age. Early wheeze can be transient and attributed to viral infections, whereas persistent wheeze is more likely to have an underlying allergic component.¹⁴ Also, early allergic sensitization to indoor allergens may indicate a different phenotype than sensitization at age 5 years. Finally, one cannot rule out statistical effects resulting from multiple comparisons and unmeasured potentially important confounders (eg, traffic exposure, mold, endotoxin, residence in mixed-use buildings, neighborhood-level pest problems). Our results suggest that prenatal exposures to pesticides may influence the risk of early cough, wheeze, and IgE production. Individual pesticides may differ in regard to risk. Further longitudinal assessments will help determine the clinical significance of the association between prenatal exposure to *cis*-permethrin and organophosphates and the development of respiratory symptoms, allergy, and asthma.

Acknowledgments

Supported by grants National Institutes of Health P01 ES09600, ES008977, P30 ES009089, Environmental Protection Agency RD 83214101, and Environmental Protection Agency R827027.

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TABLE I

Geometric means (GMs) and percentile levels (ng/m³) of pesticides measured in air

Pesticide	n	GM (ng/m ³) (95% CI)	Percentiles				% > LOD [†]
			25	50	75	95	
Diazinon	610	11.4 (10.0–13.0)	3.8	10.1	28.0	217	99.8
Chlorpyrifos	612	4.0 (3.6–4.5)	1.7	3.5	9.2	31.1	99.2
<i>cis</i> -Permethrin	607	NC*	<LOD	<LOD	<LOD	1.65	23.0
<i>trans</i> -Permethrin	585	NC*	<LOD	<LOD	0.41	2.48	26.4

* NC, Not calculated because of small percentage above the LOD.

[†] LOD, Level of detection. Pesticide levels below the LOD were assigned values of one half the LOD.

TABLE II

Associations between prenatal pesticide concentrations in air and health outcomes by age 5

Pesticide	Odds ratios (95% CIs)		
	Wheeze	Cough (without a cold)	Any specific IgE
Chlorpyrifos (n = 338)	0.91 (0.76–1.09)	0.88 (0.72–1.07)	0.78 (0.60–1.03)
Diazinon (n = 337)	0.83 ^{**} (0.72–0.95)	0.78 ^{**} (0.67–0.91)	0.64 ^{***} (0.50–0.82)
Cis- Permethrin (n = 338)	1.1 (0.86–1.33)	1.3 [*] (1.03–1.56)	0.97 (0.72–1.32)
Trans- Permethrin (n = 323)	1.1 (0.88–1.40)	1.2 (0.93–1.43)	0.95 (0.69–1.32)

Multivariable generalized estimating equation model adjusts for maternal asthma, prenatal environmental tobacco smoke exposure, Blood lead level in dust, sex, ethnicity, and age at time of 2-year, 3-year, and 5-year questionnaires.

^{*} $P < .05$.

^{**} $P < .01$.

^{***} $P < .001$.