

TOBACCO FARM WORKER SAFETY

T. David Reed, Extension Agronomist, Tobacco

Tobacco is a labor intensive crop with many situations that may expose workers to potential hazards. These hazards include ones common to other farming operations such as tractors and machinery, pesticides, and laboring in hot weather. Green tobacco sickness or GTS is a potential hazard specific to working in tobacco.

Workers should be properly trained in the safe operation of tractors and other machinery. Situations that may result in a rollover accident should be avoided. Tractor operators must be especially careful when traveling on highways as motorists often fail to appreciate the slow speed and size of farm equipment on the highway. The handling of bulk curing boxes around barns is an especially hazardous situation. Tobacco balers also represent a unique hazard with multiple pinch points and the risk of severe injury. Workers should not be allowed to get into balers when making bales.

All tobacco producers should be licensed pesticide applicators and therefore be able to provide proper supervision of workers that may be making pesticide applications or be in the vicinity of such applications. A central notification area should be available to notify workers of any pesticide applications and applicable restricted entry intervals following an application. Safety data sheets (SDS) or material safety data sheets (MSDS) are required to be made available for products used on the farm. Pesticide labels provide information on notification and posting requirements, restricted entry interval (REI), and any requirements for personal protective equipment (PPE). The PPE may differ for workers handling the materials, or applying the material, or re-entering the field during the REI.

Green tobacco sickness (GTS) is a condition specific to working in tobacco fields. The condition results from the absorption of nicotine through the skin. Absorption of nicotine is most likely to occur when the tobacco is wet. Nicotine levels in the plant are naturally highest during harvest season, less so at topping, and much less earlier in the season; thus potential exposure is greatest during the harvest season.

Symptoms of GTS may include:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Insomnia
- Loss of appetite

Although GTS is not usually a dangerous condition, the risk of dehydration is possible if an affected worker is unable to eat or drink.

Ways to Avoid Green Tobacco Sickness

- Wear a long sleeve shirt to reduce direct contact with tobacco leaves.
- Change into dry clothing if work clothes get wet from contact with tobacco.
- Wear clean work clothing each day to avoid exposure to nicotine that may accumulate each day.
- When it is necessary to work in wet tobacco, wear a protective rain suit.