

Pesticide Hazard Alert

Workers became ill after bank was fumigated

A California bank hired a pest control operator (PCO) to fumigate for termites over the weekend. On Monday, the PCO tested for the fumigant and certified the bank as safe for re-entry.

Workers immediately reported a strange odor. Several workers began to have symptoms of headaches, dizziness, vomiting, and eye tearing. Customers also complained about the odor.

The bank continued to operate because there was no procedure in place to immediately close the building and evacuate the occupants. More than three hours after odor was first detected, a building manager contacted the county health department. County officials arrived on the scene and evacuated and closed the bank. Six workers were treated at local medical facilities.



How can employers prevent similar situations?

- Use fumigation only as a last resort, because filling a building with pesticide gas means many people may be exposed if safety precautions are not taken.
- Choose a PCO certified in Integrated Pest Management, a method of pest control that uses the safest and most effective methods (see “resources” section).
- Explore safer alternatives to eradicate termites, such as heat or localized treatments.

If fumigation is necessary, how can employers keep workers safe?

- Have the PCO create a customized plan for airing out the building and monitoring for pesticides to ensure that pesticides are gone before people enter.
- Inform workers about chemical use, warning signs of exposure, and potential health effects before fumigation.
- Evacuate workers if an unusual odor is detected and/or symptoms occur.
- Seek medical attention if workers become ill.



Occupational Pesticide Illness Prevention Program

Occupational Health Branch, California Department of Public Health

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What went wrong fumigating the bank?	How can employers fumigate more safely?
Bank management and the PCO did not allow enough time to aerate (air out) the building thoroughly.	Ensure the building is aerated thoroughly. For example, schedule fumigation over a long weekend to allow more time for aeration and consider active aeration.
Gases entered the bank vault, safe deposit boxes, and other closed areas. For security reasons, these areas were aerated only briefly, if at all. These closed areas likely retained gas, causing workers to be exposed.	Create a customized air monitoring and reentry plan to ensure all gases and vapors are gone. Identify several testing locations in each room, including closed areas and other potential gas pockets.
The PCO used sulfuryl fluoride and chloropicrin. Testing for chloropicrin is not required before re-entry so the PCO did not test for it. Chloropicrin has an odor and can cause the symptoms reported by employees.	Ask the PCO to monitor for both sulfuryl fluoride and chloropicrin and to confirm that both are gone before reentry.
Workers and managers did not recognize odor and symptoms as evidence of exposure to chemical(s).	Obtain information from the PCO about the chemicals being used. Before fumigation, give your workers information about the chemicals, including warning signs of exposure and potential health effects.
Workers were not immediately evacuated after complaining of odor and symptoms of exposure.	Treat symptoms or any unusual odor as warning signs and indicators of chemical exposure. Create an emergency response plan that includes policies and procedures for evacuating the building.
Emergency services (9-1-1) was not notified after workers reported symptoms.	If workers become ill, call 9-1-1, or seek medical attention through the workers' compensation provider, and/or call the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.

Resources:

- For more information about Cal/OSHA requirements to inform workers about chemical hazards, see: www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5194.html and <http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/3203.html>.
- If you have questions or concerns about a pesticide application, contact the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office using the toll-free 1-87Pest Line.
- Search for PCOs certified in Integrated Pest Management (IPM).
 - <http://www.ecowisecertified.org>
 - <http://www.greenshieldcertified.org>
 - <http://www.certifiedgreenpro.org>
- Ensure the PCO does not have violations by checking for penalty actions at: <http://www.pestboard.ca.gov/license.shtml>.
- For more information about the safest termite eradication methods, see: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7440.html>.
- For more information about the Occupational Pesticide Illness Prevention Program, contact us at (800) 970-6680 or visit our website <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohsep/Pages/Pesticide.aspx>.