

# Poisoning Our Pets

## How a bug killer almost killed my dog

By Sue Sturgis

**M**y dog Lucy nearly died in June 2005 when she was accidentally poisoned by a common pesticide our neighbors used on their vegetable garden.

Sevin—an insecticide manufactured by Bayer CropScience in Research Triangle Park—is widely believed to be safe. There are 68 formulations approved for use in North Carolina on everything from lawns to pets, and millions of pounds are applied each year in the United States. But Sevin's active ingredient, carbaryl, is in fact a potent neurotoxin and suspected carcinogen, and federal regulators are currently considering restricting its use.

Whether or not the government will take action to better protect pets, people and the environment from this dangerous chemical remains to be seen. But in the meantime, I share Lucy's story in hopes of preventing others from suffering a similar fate.

I first noticed something amiss one late June day when I took Lucy and my other dog swimming at our favorite pond. An 11-year-old pit bull, Lucy has a touch of arthritis and moves slower on land than Zoe, a 3-year-old Aussie. But Lucy had always ruled the water until that day, when she couldn't out-swim Zoe to the sticks I tossed.

That night Lucy's unusual behavior continued, as she repeatedly got up from her bed and paced restlessly through the house. When I got up to check on her, I found her bed soaked with drool. When her slobbering continued the next day, I took her to the vet.

After the exam, the doctor looked worried. "I'm feeling some sort of growth in her abdomen," she said. "I'd like to do some X-rays."

Oh God, I thought. Not cancer. My worst fears seemed to be confirmed when the doctor put Lucy's radiograph on the light box and hit the switch. Even a non-medical professional like me could see a dark shadow near her liver.

Over the next few days, the mystery of Lucy's malady deepened. Further tests showed it wasn't cancer, but whatever she had was acutely serious. She was vomiting and growing weaker. At first she was unable to navigate stairs and soon couldn't walk at all. Eventually she couldn't even stand. She also refused water, so I had to hydrate her by injecting fluid under her skin.

At night I'd lie in bed next to her, stroking her to sleep and crying. I was watching my friend die—but of what?

I finally realized what was wrong with Lucy on July 4. To celebrate the holiday, my next-door neighbors asked if it would be OK to set off fireworks. I told them Lucy was terribly sick and I feared the noise would stress her. But they went ahead with their plans anyhow. That evening, as my dog trembled in fear amidst the explosions, I seethed.

How inconsiderate, I thought—and it's not just the fireworks. I was also upset that my neighbors used chemicals on their vegetable patch, which is only a few yards from my own garden, and which is separated from my yard only by a six-inch-high decorative fence.

Then it struck me: They had sprinkled their garden with some sort of white powder the same weekend Lucy got sick. When the fireworks stopped, I went next door to find out what the powder was.

Sevin Dust, they told me. Perfectly safe, they assured.

I looked up Sevin online and discovered the active ingredient was carbaryl. The symptoms of carbaryl poisoning include excessive salivation, vomiting and muscle weakness.

### Pets and Some Risks of Pesticides

- A 1991 National Cancer Institute (NCI) study, published in the *Journal of the NCI*, found that dogs whose owners' lawns were treated with 2,4-D, four or more times per year, are twice as likely to contract canine malignant lymphoma than dogs whose owners do not use the herbicide.
- Exposure to herbicide-treated lawns and gardens increases the risk of bladder cancer by four to seven times in Scottish Terriers, according to a study by Purdue University veterinary researchers published in the April 15, 2004 issue of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*.
- Research published in the December 1988 issue of *Preventive Veterinary Medicine* links hyperthyroidism in cats to flea powders and sprays, lawn pesticides and canned cat food.
- Allethrin, a common ingredient in home mosquito products (coils, mats, oils and sprays) and other bug sprays, has been linked to liver problems in dogs, according to a 1989 study by the World Health Organization.
- The 1989 edition W.C. Campbell *Toxicology* textbook reports that chronic exposure to abamectin, an insecticide often used by homeowners on fire ants can affect the nervous system of dogs and cause symptoms such as pupil dilation, lethargy, and tremors.



Sue Sturgis with her dogs.

I immediately called my vet at home. Could my dog have been poisoned?

Eureka! Bring her in first thing in the morning, the doctor said.

The next day Lucy got the antidote, atropine. When I fetched her from the animal hospital that afternoon, she was groggy but able to walk. An ultrasound of her abdomen was clear. What we thought was a tumor was actually a liver swollen with toxins.

Sevin poisoned my dog—but how? My neighbor's decorative fence, though flimsy, has always kept her off the garden. Did the chemical drift onto her? Onto grass she then ate? Did she walk in drift and lick her paws? We may never know.

When I told my neighbors what happened, they were aghast. They had no idea Sevin could be so dangerous. In fact, they had originally bought it to sprinkle on their own dog for fleas. To my relief, they promised not to use chemical pesticides on their garden anymore.

A confession: I have a reputation among family and friends as a chemophobe. I garden and eat organically. I clean my house with all-natural products. I even fought the city of Raleigh, North Carolina over what I considered its reckless use of pesticides in parks, twice getting it in trouble with state regulators before it adopted a more responsible pesticide policy.

But even *I* didn't get alarmed when my neighbors doused their garden with what was obviously a pesticide. Even *I* failed to make the connection between the chemical and my dog's

illness. Like most Americans, I presumed that if it's sold in stores for home use, it must be safe.

"The basic assumption that people bring to their purchasing is that availability in the marketplace equates to safety, and that couldn't be further from the truth," says Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides, a Washington-based safety advocacy group.

In fact, though carbaryl was first approved for use in 1959, it's never been brought into compliance with modern safety standards, according to Toxic Tradeoff, a recent report on carbaryl by the Washington Toxics Coalition. As early as 1969, a U.S. government report called for restricting carbaryl after it was found to cause birth defects in test dogs. Carbaryl is also highly toxic to bees and has been linked to immune-system cancer in farmers and brain cancer in children.

In 1980, five years after the Environmental Protection Agency launched a special review over concerns about carbaryl's safety, the review was abruptly ended—a political and economic decision, according to Janette Sherman, M.D., then an advisor to EPA on pesticides and the *Toxic Substances Control Act*.

Carbaryl is currently undergoing "re-registration"—the federal process in which the EPA assesses a pesticide by current standards. The agency has indicated it may make some changes such as eliminating certain lawn care and pet uses, but safety advocates worry regulators might not go far enough. In January 2005, 15 public health, farmworker, beekeeping and environmental groups called on the agency to end all uses of carbaryl because of the harm it causes to human and ecosystem health.

What's especially troublesome to me is that the pain and suffering carbaryl causes is simply unnecessary.

"There are so many non-toxic alternatives out there," says Fawn Pattison, executive director of the Agricultural Resources Center/Pesticide Education Project in Raleigh. "It's not necessary to take risks like that, especially in your garden where you're growing your own food. People should really think twice before they reach for that can."

Lucy and I would agree.

*Sue Sturgis is a writer for the Independent Weekly in Durham, North Carolina. This article originally appeared in the August 3, 2005 issue of the Independent and is reprinted here by permission.*

**If you suspect your pet has been poisoned,**

contact the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Animal Poison Control Center, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, at 888-426-4435. A \$50 consultation fee may be applied to your credit card. After the emergency, contact Beyond Pesticides to complete a Pesticide Incident Report. We will use this information in the media as a way of exposing an inadequate pesticide regulatory system and exerting increased pressure for change.