

FINDING A COMPANY THAT CAN PREVENT PEST PROBLEMS

If you have a pest problem, you may be able to solve it yourself with the help of the resources listed at the end of this fact sheet. However, if you want or need to hire a professional pest control service, look for a company that offers less-toxic pest control or Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM focuses on long-term prevention of pests and their damage through a combination of techniques such as habitat modification, biological control, and physical control. Pesticides are used only if truly necessary and are selected to be effective against a specific pest while minimizing risks to you, your family and pets, wildlife, beneficial insects, and our environment. IPM is a common sense preventative approach and is less toxic than conventional spraying. IPM methods are based on extensive scientific research.

Studies have demonstrated that using less-toxic pest management or IPM saves money compared to conventional pest control. Because the initial costs are typically higher, companies that haven't adopted less-toxic approaches

DOING YOUR PART

For less-toxic pest control to work, you must do your part. If the pest control company makes recommendations about cleanup, home repairs, or other steps you should take to help prevent pest problems, make sure you follow their instructions.

may believe they cost more. However, less-toxic pest management pays for itself in the long term because it treats the underlying problem (why you have pests); conventional controls typically treat just the symptoms.

ASK BEFORE YOU HIRE

When you first contact a company, tell them that you are concerned about the use of pesticides and would like them to use only less-toxic pest control methods. Some companies may try to convince you that chemical sprays are safe and more effective. Be persistent. Find out to what extent a company you're considering uses non-chemical approaches to pest control and how it would approach your particular problem. Here's what to look for:

APPROACH

- **Ask if they are willing to do pest control without sprays.** Their response will help you determine their philosophical approach to pest control.
- **Discuss various methods and determine if the company provides less-toxic options, such as those discussed below.** A company that offers less-toxic pest control or IPM should use conventional chemicals for a small percentage of their jobs.

- **Inspection** — Ask the company to find out how the pests are entering, where they are hiding, what's attracting them, and what they are eating. A less-toxic approach will begin with a thorough inspection to determine *why* you have a pest problem, as well as the extent of the problem. The key to effective pest control is detailed information about the pest. It is very difficult to control a pest if the company doesn't know specifically what species it is. The company should also ask you whether anyone living in the house is pregnant, less than one year old, chemically sensitive, asthmatic or elderly, and whether you have pets.
- **Habitat modifications** — Ask what the company will do to prevent a re-infestation of the pest. Since pests need food, water, and shelter to survive, eliminating or reducing one of these via habitat modification (for example, by caulking cracks, screening holes, and replacing door thresholds) will reduce the pest population.
- **Other physical controls** — Physical controls may be used to trap or kill the pest, not just modify its habitat. Physical controls include vacuuming up pests or using traps or barriers.
- **Biological controls** — Some companies will use other organisms, such as beneficial nematodes or lacewings, to control certain pests.
- **Horticultural controls** — Horticultural controls involve how the yard and garden are cared for. For example, plants produce less top



Choose less toxic products for your home and garden. Look for this symbol before you buy.

growth if fed a slow-release or organic fertilizer – making them less attractive to certain pests. Good horticultural practices are important, since a healthy lawn and garden will naturally resist or outgrow most pest damage.

CHEMICAL CONTROLS

Less-toxic chemical controls

- **Ask how the company makes decisions about when, where, and what (if any) pesticides to use.** A less-toxic pest control service will not spray routinely and, if it sprays at all, will only spray where the pest is a problem. Chemical sprays should not be used to prevent infestations.
- **Look for a company that chooses less-toxic chemicals such as borates or boric acid, diatomaceous earth (DE), insecticidal soaps, horticultural oils, and those contained in bait stations.** A capable provider of less-toxic pest management or IPM will select the most effective, least toxic chemical to complete the job and will use it only in the areas where the pests are a problem.

Conventional chemicals

- **Ask for copies of labels and “material safety data sheets” (or “MSDS”) for any pesticide a company plans to use in your home or yard.**
- **Ask whether the company uses chemical pesticides as a last resort.** If the pesticide applicator is going to spray, look for someone who will spray selectively to reach the target pest and won't spray the whole yard or the entire perimeter of your home.
- **Ask to see a copy of the “service ticket” they will use.** Check to make sure the following will be on it: target pest, name of any pesticides used and their EPA registration number, how much pesticide was applied and where and when it was applied.
- **If the company must use a chemical spray, ask it to post the areas to be treated with warning signs or flags — prior to the treatment and for 72 hours afterwards.**
- **Monitoring — Discuss the actions the company will take if pests re-occur.** Monitoring is important because when less-toxic pest controls are used, insects will die back gradually instead of all at once, as they do with conventional pesticides. The company should place monitors around the home and check them regularly to make sure the control is working and to change it if necessary.
- **References — Interview several companies. Ask for and contact references.**
- **Licensing and training – Make sure the company and on-site technicians are registered and licensed.**
- **Claims — Be cautious if a company claims it uses “safe pesticides” or “safe chemicals.”** Pesticides can be applied safely, but no pesticide (even a less-toxic one) is entirely safe. “Odorless” does not mean safe. **Be cautious of claims that a company can control “ALL insects.”** If they claim to control all insects, you can be sure they are using a broad-spectrum pesticide that will kill even beneficial insects such as ladybugs, honeybees, and butterflies.
- **Contracts — Be cautious of the monthly service contract.** A less-toxic approach SHOULD include regular monitoring of pest populations but NEVER calendar applications of pesticide — whether or not you have a pest problem. Do not authorize any pest treatment without reading and signing a detailed written contract.
- **Records and reporting — Ask the company to provide you with regular reports, including an inspection report with a specific pest identification and monitoring reports.**

PESTICIDES AND WATER POLLUTION

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has declared San Francisco Bay, the Delta, and many local creeks polluted by common home and garden pesticides. These pesticides reach our waters through both the sewer and storm drain systems due to normal use and improper disposal. To address this problem, Bay Area water pollution prevention agencies are working to reduce the amount of pesticides entering sewer systems and storm drains. Sales data for the most popular pesticides in the country show that commercial applicators and consumers each account for about 50 percent of sales. So preventing pesticides from entering sewer systems and storm drains will take everyone's help.

Pest control strategies and methods described in these publications are consistent with integrated pest management (IPM) concepts, and are based on scientific studies and tests in actual home and garden settings. Use suggested products according to label directions and dispose of unwanted or leftover pesticides at a household hazardous waste collection facility or event. No endorsement of specific brand name products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Finding a Less-Toxic Pest Control Service
This web site is a directory of companies that provide less-toxic pest control services:

Safety Source for Pest Management
www.beyondpesticides.org/infoservices/pcos/index.htm

No endorsement of specific companies by Bay Area water pollution prevention agencies is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar companies that are not listed.

Doing It Yourself

The following resources can help you control a pest yourself:

Bio-Integral Resource Center (BIRC):
510-524-2567, www.birc.org

UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners: in your local phone book

Central Contra Costa Sanitary District:
www.centrialsan.org

UC Statewide IPM Project:
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu

In addition, you can consult one of the following guides and fact sheets produced by Bay Area water pollution prevention agencies and available by calling 1-888-BayWise (1-888-229-9473) or by visiting: www.centrialsan.org:

Our Water, Our World fact sheets

Control It!

Grow It!

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Geoff Brousseau, BASMAA

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