

## Q&A: What is naphthalene and is it harmful?

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As we progress farther into the “Age of Knowledge” we are constantly finding out about things that we previously thought were safe are actually unsafe. In some cases it has been true and the new knowledge was a useful tool bringing us a healthier lifestyle. Examples of this are use of asbestos, lead in paint, radon gas and the list goes on. In the other cases it was either political or a case of too much knowledge or inaccurate knowledge. The other cases would definitely support the theory that many Americans know so much that isn’t true or in this case relevant. Of course, I can’t say anything because I just might be the Library of Congress for knowledge that is irrelevant. By the way, did you know that the Washington Monument had 897 steps to the top?

Today I have mentioned naphthalene. Occasionally I receive informational pamphlets and fliers for safety regarding chemicals and pesticides. The one I received on naphthalene prompted me to address the topic because this is a substance we have all been around and a majority may have this in our homes. Naphthalene is the active ingredient in mothballs and other products. As you all know it has a strong odor which makes it effective against many pests. It actually kills moths and their eggs and acts as a deterrent for many pests including squirrels, bats, snakes and rabbits. Some snake deterrent products combine naphthalene and sulfur and is marketed to create a barrier around the home. Unfortunately, it is not a very rain fast product and requires continuous re-application to be affective for outdoor use. From my experiences being an extension agent I have found that you often see some substances used for pest control when there is no obvious choice for control. If nothing else works . . . use moth balls!!

Let me just say loud and clear that no pesticide should be used for any purpose that isn’t consistent with the label. As naphthalene can control moths in the home it can also be unhealthy. We can easily get naphthalene in our systems by breathing, eating, drinking or touching it. Exposure to large amounts can destroy red blood cells and encourage hemolytic anemia. It can also make you dizzy and tired if you breathe enough of it. If you have clothing, diapers or blankets that have absorbed naphthalene it can also cause anemia and skin irritation. Perhaps the most important risks are the chronic risks of long time exposure which has been linked to kidney damage and possibly cancer. Notice I said possibly. The reason I said possibly is because the information I possess on the subject used the word possibly. In my personal opinion that just means they used that word because they cannot prove that it causes cancer but they are speculating that it does.

What does this information mean? I think it means to use caution if you have to use naphthalene. Remember safety first! I think that naphthalene is perhaps most dangerous to children because the mothballs can resemble candy, so we need to make sure there is not a risk by keeping them in a way that children don’t have access to them. I would also say that it would be safer to find a different way of controlling the pest. Consider integrated pest management (IPM) for controlling pests. IPM utilizes knowledge of the pest to aide in its control. IPM considers when, where and why a pest is active and/or when environmental conditions require that pest control is necessary. Usually, the most important actions deal with eliminating food and water sources and strategic positioning of repellants during specific seasons. Regardless of the pest or the situation remember to think before you decide on a control measure. As the carpenter said “measure twice and cut once” we need to “think twice and treat once”.