What is a Pest?

What do ants, aphids, mice and mealy bugs have in common? They are sometimes called pests! A pest is an insect, animal or plant that is out of place or not where it naturally belongs. For instance, ants have a place in nature when they dig tunnels underground. This brings oxygen to soil so plants can grow. When a stream of ants is crawling on our kitchen counter however, they are out of place.

Pest Control Tool Box

Although there are many ways to control pests, it can be puzzling trying to figure out the best way. The safer approach called Integrated Pest Management (IPM for short) has been developed to help us solve this puzzle!

A Identify the Pest

What kind of pest is it? Is it really creating a problem? Is it one or two ants on the counter, or a whole stream of ants across the floor?

B Monitor and Keep Records

Pay attention to areas or plants where you think there may be a pest problem. Is the pest growing in numbers or doing any real damage?

C Decide if the Pest is a Problem

If the pest isn’t creating a problem yet, try to figure out when it might become serious enough to require action. Are there certain pests you won’t tolerate at all in the home or classroom? Are there others that don’t pose a problem if there’s one or two?

D Choose the Safest Treatments

IPM always tries to solve the pest problem using the safest way first. The goal is to suppress or keep the pest problem down, not necessarily to eradicate or destroy every single pest. Select ways to control the pest that are easy to carry out, long lasting and safest for the environment. For instance, instead of using poisonous or toxic chemicals called pesticides to kill ants, we can put spices like cinnamon or red pepper at the point where they enter the home or classroom. This helps keep ants away.

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Different Ways to Keep Pests Away

The goal of IPM is to limit or stop the food, water, and shelter a pest has so that it will go away. Another goal is to prevent it from entering a space or building. There are several ways to do this:

Keep it Clean

Pests are usually attracted to messy or dirty areas. Look to where the pests are, and chances are you need to do a little cleaning. Make sure all food is put away and sealed, and that counters are wiped clean. A tiny crumb to you is a feast to a cockroach! Also be sure to throw away all garbage, clear out clutter in cupboards, drawers and closets, and pull weeds from the garden. This makes it hard for pests to find food and shelter.

Block Their Way

Even very small holes can act as a doorway for insects to come inside your house. Use barriers like window screens to keep out flies and mosquitoes. You can also use a variety of traps to catch flies, cockroaches, ants, mice and rats. Make sure that only adults handle these traps!

Use Your Hands

These actions either directly kill the pest or make it very difficult for them to survive. For instance, use a fly-swatter instead of poisonous sprays. Turn the soil in your garden over with a hoe to expose garden pests that may then be eaten by birds. You can also get rid of snails, slugs and unwanted caterpillars by handpicking them off the plant. Another method would be to use a strong spray of water to remove aphids from plants.

Let Nature Help

All species—including insects—have natural enemies. IPM uses natural enemies or biological controls to manage pests. The most common natural enemies are predators and parasitoids. A predator is an organism that eats another living thing. For example, a ladybug is a predator that will eat an aphid. A parasitoid is an organism that slowly feeds off another organism in order to grow into an adult. One example of parasites used in IPM is mini-wasps which are harmless to humans and which will feed off a variety of insect pests before eventually killing them.

Chemical Uses

If previous methods of pest control have failed to work, IPM will use chemicals to control pests. Only the safest, least toxic chemicals should be used. Treat only the specific problem (like one plant, or one corner of a room) rather than spraying the whole garden or house with chemicals. Only adults should handle chemicals, and they should be sure to read the instructions carefully. Some natural, safer sprays can be made from household items like dish soap! Just take a spray bottle filled with water and add a few drops of liquid soap. Use this to clean aphids off of plants and to clean up ant trails inside your home.

We Can Make a Difference!

Integrated Pest Management reduces the amount of toxic chemicals we use to control pests. Let’s do our best to use IPM!