Insecticides Mode of Action in Relation to Their Toxicity to Non-Target Organisms

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Abstract

The mode of action of insecticides is responsible for their higher or lower toxicity to non-target organisms. However, the large variations in susceptibility among different animal taxa indicate that certain biochemical traits particular to a group of organisms are responsible for a specific level of sensitivity. A review of toxicity data to non-target organisms is presented here. Aquatic arthropods are most susceptible to all types of insecticides because they share many physiological features with the target insects. Other aquatic organisms, such as fish and amphibians, are very sensitive to broad-spectrum neurotoxic and respiratory inhibitor insecticides, but not so much to selective insecticides such as IGRs and stomach poisons. Terrestrial vertebrates are also sensitive to most neuro-toxicants and respiratory inhibitors, with the exception of those insecticides derived from natural toxins produced by plants or fungi (e.g. pyrethroids, neonicotinoids, avermectins, spinosad), which appear to have little or no toxicity in birds and mammals.

Keywords: Review; Neurotoxicity; Inhibitors; Growth regulators

Introduction

The worldwide use of pesticides in agriculture results in residues of insecticides being commonly found in many environments, from the cropping fields and orchards to rivers, estuaries and oceans, and even urban environments [1,2]. Insecticides are useful to control pest outbreaks, but insecticide pollution is one of the many problems faced by our modern society. This is because the extreme toxicity of most of these natural and man-made chemicals affects not only the target pests but also many other species of animals, although in different degrees [3].

Indeed, insecticides can alter the ecological structure of earthworms and arthropod communities in the soil [4,5] and around crops [6], thus affecting birds and other vertebrates that feed on these organisms [7]. Insecticide spray drift can kill birds in the vicinity of crops [8], and their water-borne residues can decimate zooplankton, aquatic larvae of crustaceans and insects for short or long periods of time [9,10], or affect the growth and development of tadpoles [11] and fish [12].

It is imperative, therefore, that the society recognises the hazards and risks of using insecticides. Just because they are designed to kill insects, it does not exclude them from killing other animals, even humans [13,14]. We need to understand the toxic nature of these highly poisonous substances to the large variety of non-target organisms, so that precautionary measures may be taken to mitigate their negative effects in human health and the environment.

Many books and research articles have been published on the various mechanisms of pesticide toxicity, and insecticides in particular [15]. Unfortunately, in spite of all the technical knowledge gathered in this area of science in recent decades, little effort has been made to provide a comprehensive review on the toxicity levels of all kinds of insecticides to the various non-target taxa. An old review of this kind considered arthropods only [16], whereas more recent reviews have focused on sublethal effects on beneficial arthropods [17]. Toxicity data of individual compounds to certain species exists, but it is mainly found in the Pesticide Manual [18] and databases like ECOTOX of the US EPA (http://cfpub.epa.gov/ecotox/). However, raw data such as these have no meaning to the man on the street, not even to the educated person. Numbers by themselves cannot tell the story. What is needed is a readily available document that explains the hazards of the different insecticidal compounds and their comparative toxicity to non-target organisms, pinpointing the most toxic compounds in the market, so that people working with pesticides (mainly farmers and applicators, but also consultants, regulators, agronomists and environmentalists) may understand what they are dealing with. Only from such a perspective we will be able to grasp adequately any problem arising from insecticide usage.

This paper aims at closing that gap in knowledge. Insecticide effects on non-target organisms are discussed in relation to the specific mode of action of the compounds, in an attempt to clarify why certain insecticidal compounds are more toxic than others to specific taxa.

Toxicity of Insecticides to Non-Target Organisms

The potency of a toxic chemical is usually gauged by its lethal median dose (LD50), median lethal concentration (LC50) or median effective concentration (EC50) to surrogate species belonging to common taxa, i.e. fish, mammals, birds, crustaceans, worms and bees. With the exception of insect pests, which are the target of the insecticides, all other species and taxa are considered non-target organisms. It is a fact that different species within the same taxonomic class can vary considerably, e.g. one or two orders of magnitude, in susceptibility to a given toxicant, so selection of representative test species for the OECD standard testing protocols is important [19,20]. However, a comparison of LD(50) values for a range of insecticides tested on the same species provides a practical way of assessing the relative potency of such chemicals to the taxon they represent. Often a given insecticide has been tested on several species of the same taxonomic group, thus providing a range of LD(50)s for that taxon and, therefore, more

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The toxicity and specificity of insecticides is a consequence of their biochemical mode of action at the cellular or physiological level in organisms. Whilst toxicity is determined by the internal dose required to cause the death of an organism (Paracelsus), the specificity depends on the biochemical or physiological mechanisms targeted by the insecticide, which can either vary substantially among taxa (i.e. selective insecticides) or be similar for all animals (i.e. broad-spectrum insecticides). Obviously, broad-spectrum insecticides are hazardous to all kinds of animals, even if their lethal doses are necessarily higher for larger animals than for small insects.

The following paragraphs contain a discussion on the toxic characteristics of each group of insecticides to non-target organisms based on their mechanism of action.

**Neurotoxic insecticides**

Their target is one of the five neurotransmitter systems – particularly cholinergic– found in the neuronal system of arthropods, which are either activated (agonist action) or inhibited (antagonist action) by the insecticide. Break down of the neuronal activity causes brain death or affects the motor system through paralysis, convulsions, hyperactivity and spasms. Organisms susceptible to this kind of poisons include all arthropods, vertebrates, earthworms and marine worms, molluscs and other organisms with a developed neuronal system.

Acetylcholinesterase (AChE) inhibitors comprise the organophosphorous (e.g. chlorpyrifos, dimethoate and 60 others) and carbamate (e.g. aldicarb, methomyl, pirimicarb and 25 others) insecticides. Since AChE is the main enzyme in the nicotine and muscarine receptors of neurons and muscular junctions in animals, they are broad-spectrum and very toxic poisons, especially to bees, mammals and birds (Table 1). Organophosphorous insecticides tend to be more selective than carbamates, in particular to aquatic organisms, and this may be due to the fact that their binding to the receptor is irreversible, whereas that of carbamates is not [15]. The only exception is the worms, for which LC50 values of carbamates are generally lower than those of OPs. For this reason, many carbamate products are used as nematicides and soil sterilants.

γ-aminobutyric acid receptors (GABA-R) are located in the postsynaptic dendrites of the central nervous system in all animals, but in arthropods also in the neuromuscular junctions and ganglia. The avermectins (e.g. abamectin) are agonists of these receptors [34], and are particularly toxic to all arthropods (i.e. crustaceans, bees and spiders) – in fact, they are the most toxic insecticides to bees and zooplankton cladocerans (Table 1). Less susceptibility of vertebrates, including fish, to avermectins may be indicative of a different type of GABA-R in higher animals. The organochlorine cyclodiene insecticides (e.g. endosulfan) are antagonists of GABA-R [35], and appear to be quite toxic to most animals, especially to fish and macro-crustaceans, and to large extent worms. Fipronil is also antagonist of this receptor [36], and is equally toxic to vertebrates but not to fish. Lack of toxicological information about this new insecticide prevents any assessment of its impacts on amphibians, worms and bees. Zooplankton cladocerans seem to be less susceptible to all GABA-R antagonists than to agonists.

Nicotine acetylcholinesterase receptors (nACh-R) are located in the post-synaptic dendrites of all neurons in the brain, spinal cord, ganglia, and muscular junctions. Nicotine, neonicotinoids (e.g. imidacloprid, thiacloprid) and spinosad activate it [37,38] causing hyperactivity and death in insects and worms. Their extreme toxicity to insects contrasts with their low toxicity to all vertebrate taxa, and this selectivity is due to a different kind of nACh-R found in vertebrates [38,39]. Although neonicotinoids are not toxic to Daphnia and cladocerans in general, they – and imidacloprid in particular – can be toxic to other crustaceans.
### Table 1: Comparative toxicity of insecticides to non-target organisms, according to their mode of action: agonists (+) and antagonists (-) to specified receptors.

*Geometric mean oral LD50s (bees, birds, mammals) or LC50s (aquatic, worms) for all compounds (n) in a class. Dash denotes no data available. Sources: ECOTOX (http://cfpub.epa.gov/ecotox/), [18, 21, 22].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mode of action</th>
<th>Insecticide class</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Cladocerans</th>
<th>Macro-crustaceans</th>
<th>Aquatic insects</th>
<th>Fish</th>
<th>Amphibians</th>
<th>Bees</th>
<th>Earthworms</th>
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<td>µg/L</td>
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<td>mg/kg soil</td>
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<td>33.9</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>90.3</td>
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<td>Hormone mimics (+)</td>
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<td>Ecysyne agonists</td>
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<td>16733.0</td>
<td>344.5</td>
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<td>Membrane disruption</td>
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<td>B. thuringiensis (BI), sulfofuron, cryolite</td>
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<td>Detoxification (-)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Phosphorin</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3160</td>
<td>4999</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chemicals that are not produced anymore or have been banned from usage are not included here.

ATPase inhibitors such as the organotins and propargylate, which are used as acaricides, are particularly toxic to all aquatic organisms, from crustaceans to fish and amphibians. However, they seem to be relatively harmless to bees and terrestrial vertebrates, suggesting that the sophisticated detoxification mechanisms found in terrestrial animals mitigate the action of these highly toxic substances in the latter taxa [43].

Disrupters of the electron transport mechanism in the mitochondria include those that uncouple complex I (e.g. rotenone), complex II (e.g. diocofol) or complex III (e.g. acloninoyl). However, for most compounds in this class (e.g. chlorfenapyr, diafenthiuron, DNOC, etc.) the exact target is unknown. In any case, they are very toxic to fish, amphibians, zooplankton and worms, but less toxic to vertebrates, except for chlorfenapyr, which is very toxic to birds [44].

The specific mechanisms of fumigant toxicity are not known, but these chemicals are very toxic to birds and mammals (Table 1). Hazards are likely to be enhanced among these organisms because of their direct exposure through inhalation of the volatile fumigants. aquatic organisms, by contrast, are less susceptible to these compounds [45].

**Growth inhibitors and regulators (IGR)**

These are selective insecticides that break the life-cycle of arthropod development and metamorphosis. Consequently, they are quite harmless to all vertebrates and non-arthropod invertebrates such as worms, mollusks, etc.

Inhibitors of chitin biosynthesis include the benzoylureas (e.g. difluubenzuron), cyromazine and buprofexin, which disrupt growth in

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all arthropods, since they all have an exoskeleton made of chitin [46]. For the same reason, all crustaceans are very susceptible (Table 1), and can be seriously affected when exposed to residues of these compounds in waters [47,48].

Mechanisms of action

Mite growth disruptors (e.g. clofentezine) are selective to this taxon, and practically non-toxic for all other animals except crustaceans, which are moderately susceptible. The specific mechanisms of action differ among compounds, and in most cases are unknown [18].

Ecstasy agonists. The steroidal hormone ecstasy, which prompts moulting in arthropods, is mimicked by azadirachtin and diacylhydrazines (e.g. tebufenozide). These compounds are agonists that cause premature moulting in the larval stages of some insect taxa such as Lepidoptera –but not bees–, thus preventing them from reaching the adult stage in due time [49]. Very selective and non-hazardous insecticides to any other animal taxa [50].

Juvenile hormone analogues (JH). Methoprene, hydroprene, kinoprene, pyriproxyfen and fenoxycestralact also as agonists of the hormonal system that keeps all insects (including bees) in their larval stage, thus preventing the pupae to moult into adults [51]. Although they are selective insecticides, can also affect zooplankton cladocerans [52], suggesting they also mimic the hormones involved in the moulting of crustaceans.

Stomach poisons

Cryolite, sulfofuran sodium and the Cry toxins produced by Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) destroy the midgut tissues in caterpillars [53], being therefore very specific to Lepidoptera insects but quite harmless to all other insects and animal taxa.

Other modes of action

Pymetrozine and azadirachtin have anti-feedant properties [54, 55], but the mechanism involved in this action is not well understood. Synergists (e.g. pyrethroid peroxybenzoate) enhance the toxicity of other insecticides by inhibiting the cellular detoxification mechanisms (e.g. monooxygenases, cytochrome P450, etc) [56], and can be toxic by themselves. Natural or artificial pheromones attract individuals of the same pest species (i.e. sex pheromones for females), being the most specific substances used in insect control [57] and probably the safest for non-target organisms (Table 1).
Regardless of the size difference, OC insecticides are about one order of magnitude more toxic to non-planktonic crustaceans (typical LC50 15-37 µg/L), while pyrethroids and OPs continue to be the most toxic insecticides to large crustaceans, with LC50s for 50% of their compounds in the range 1.5-7.7 and 8-316 µg/L, respectively (Figure 1b). Also, while carbamates and chitin inhibitors have similar toxicity as in cladocerans, avermectins are not as toxic to macro-crustaceans (e.g. abamectin LC50 77 µg/L, [18]).

It is also interesting to note that most respiratory inhibitors –except for propargite– show little toxicity in large crustaceans (typical LC50 1.2-4.0 mg/L). In contrast, neonicotinoids and spinosad are one order of magnitude more toxic to macro-crustaceans than to cladocerans, with LC50s for 50% of their compounds in the range 5.3-8.0 mg/L, although these are not very toxic levels.

**Aquatic insects**: Toxicity levels of insecticides for non-target aquatic insects do not differ much from those of crustaceans, with neurotoxic compounds being more toxic than others. As it could be expected, pyrethroids are the most toxic insecticides to larvae of mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies, dragonflies and aquatic beetles (typical L50 1.6 µg/L), followed by neonicotinoids (typical L50 6.0 µg/L), although information for this class of compounds is still scarce. Aquatic insects appear to be more sensitive to OC insecticides than to cholinesterase inhibitors, with OPs being more toxic than carbamates: typical LC50 values are in the range 15-67 µg/L for OCs, 25-155 µg/L for OPs and 54-850 µg/L for carbamates (Figure 1c). Hormone mimics and chitin inhibitors are one order of magnitude less toxic than the previous chemical groups, with cyromazine in particular being harmless (LC50 >100 mg/L). Insecticides that target the electron transport systems are the least toxic to aquatic insects, with typical LC50 values in the range 1.3-11.5 mg/L. Similar susceptibilities are obtained with the synergist piperonyl butoxide (LC50 2.7 mg/L) and propargite (LC50 14.8 mg/L), while amitraz appears to be almost harmless (LC50 24.6 mg/L).

**Fish**: Fish show a wide range of sensitivities within the same class of insecticides, but this variability might be due to the variety of species tested. In general, fish are extremely sensitive to pyrethroids (typical...
LC50 0.001-0.13 mg/L, organochlorines (typical LC50 0.02-0.1 mg/L) and respiratory inhibitors (typical LC50 0.01-0.8 mg/L), while amitraz and indoxacarb are also very toxic to them (LC50 <1 mg/L). Equally, the acaricides dinactin and pirimidifen appear to be very toxic to fish, with LC50s of 0.003 and 0.09 mg/L (carp), respectively [18].

Although other neurotoxic insecticides such as cholinesterase inhibitors and dithiols are quite toxic to fish as well, their lethal levels are usually one or two orders of magnitude above that of the former chemical classes (Figure 1d). Fumigants and PCP can be included in the same category (LC50 range 0.17-14.0 mg/L). Hormone mimics and ecdysone agonists have similar levels of toxicity to fish, with 50% of these compounds having LC50s in the range 0.5-8.4 mg/L. It is apparent in figure 1c that the toxicity of respiratory inhibitors, OPs and carbamates to fish varies enormously among compounds (and probably among species), even though their geometric mean LC50s are 0.32, 2.5 and 4.9 mg/L, respectively. Among these, the most toxic compounds to fish (i.e., LC50s <0.1 mg/L) are the respiratory inhibitors azocyclotin, propargite, diafenthiuron, rotenone, pyridaben, fenpyroximate, fenazaquin and tebufenpyrad; the OP terbufos, methidathion, mevinphos, chlorethoxyfos, sulfotep, fenamiphos, azinphos-ethyl and azinphos-methyl; and the carbamates carbosulfan and furathiocarb. Equally variable is the toxicity of the three avermectins, ranging widely from the very toxic abamectin (LC50 0.01 mg/L, trout and bluegill) to the non-toxic emamectin benzoate (LC50 802 mg/L, trout and minnow).

Synergists are moderately toxic to fish, with typical LC50s in the range 4.2-22 mg/L. Although most IGRs are little or non-toxic to fish, there are a few exceptions: the chitin inhibitor diflubenzuron and the mite growth inhibitor clofentezine have LC50s <1 mg/L (zebra fish, trout and bluegill). Interestingly, modern insecticides like neonicotinoids, spinosad and fipronil are practically non-toxic to fish, with LC50s well above 10 mg/L in all cases.

Amphibians: Toxicological data for this taxon of non-target organisms is growing year after year, prompted by fears that the decline in populations of many species of frogs could be partly due to direct or indirect effects of insecticides [60,61]. The overwhelming majority of toxicity data currently available is for frogs and toads, with only a handful of data being available for salamanders (Ambystoma sp.). Therefore, given the limitations of the dataset, the following remarks should be taken with caution.

As in fish, pyrethroids are by far the most toxic insecticides to amphibians (typical LC50 0.01-0.5 mg/L, Figure 1e), together with the respiratory inhibitors (typical LC50 0.1-0.6 mg/L), pentachlorophenol (LC50 0.3 mg/L) and the acaricide benzoximate (LC50 0.55 mg/L). Apart from these compounds, the cyclodiene endosulfan together with the OPs fenthion, diazinon, chlorpyrifos, malathion, sulfotep and the carbamate thiodicarb are the most toxic insecticides to amphibians (all LC50s <1 mg/L). However, other neurotoxic and respiratory toxicity in amphibians tends to be lower compared to fish or mammals.
inhibitors are not as toxic, with typical LC50 values for OC insecticides in the range 0.3–4.0 mg/L, while 50% of cholinesterase inhibitors have LC50s in the range 2-14 mg/L (OPs) or 12-39 mg/L (carbamates), whereas the LC50 of amitraz to frogs is 8.6 mg/L [62]. Surprisingly, the synergist piperonyl butoxide is quite toxic to amphibians (LC50 2.1 mg/L, Figure 1e), suggesting that mechanisms of detoxification in amphibians are more susceptible than those in fish, perhaps because they are more developed.

As in fish, the neonicotinoid imidacloprid is non-toxic to Rana spp. [63]. In general, it can be said that insecticide toxicity levels of most chemical classes to amphibians are similar to those found in fish (Figures 1d and 1e).

**Terrestrial non-target organisms**

Terrestrial animals have developed efficient detoxification mechanisms in their struggle to counteract the many plant poisons available in nature [58]. As a consequence, they are better prepared to withstand insecticide levels in their bodily tissues. It is not surprising that because of this, together with the fact that most vertebrates are larger in size than invertebrates, many terrestrial animals have a higher tolerance of pesticides (Figure 2a-d).

**Earthworms:** Fumigants are designed to eliminate nematodes and other soil organisms that may be vectors of diseases. However, toxicity data of these chemicals to earthworms are unavailable (Table 1), even if one may suspect they must be the most toxic pesticides affecting these organisms. Apart from fumigants, all neurotoxic insecticides and respiratory inhibitors of the electron transport system appear to have similar toxicity to earthworms, with LC50s usually in the range 35-130 mg/kg of active ingredient in dry soil (Figure 2a). Among them, the most toxic compounds are tefluthrin (LC50 0.3 mg/kg), imidacloprid (3 mg/kg), β-cyfluthrin (5.5), endosulfan and methidathion (7), chlorfenapyr (8.5) and aldicarb (9).

Fluacrypyrim and PCP are moderately toxic to earthworms, with LC50s of 23 and 77 mg/kg soil, respectively. Inhibitors of ATPase (e.g. organotins) are only slightly toxic to these organisms (typical LC50 550 mg/kg), as are the synergists (LC50 range 230-450 mg/kg) and all the IGRs (typical LC50 980-1000 mg/kg), with the exception of the chitin inhibitor bistrifluron (LC50 33 mg/kg). Interestingly, amitraz and indoxacarb are not toxic to earthworms (LC50 >1000 mg/kg, [18]).

**Bees:** Being insects, honeybees are very susceptible to all kinds of insecticides. It is worth noting that the most toxic insecticide classes to these non-target insects are the avermectins (LD50 0.04 µg/bee), neonicotinoids (typical LD50 0.03-3.6 µg/bee) and pyrethroids (typical LD50 0.07-1.3 µg/bee). However, the cyano-substituted neonicotinoids (e.g. thiacloprid and acetamiprid) are three orders of magnitude less toxic to honeybees in spite of having the same mode of action as the other compounds in this class [64]. Cholinesterase inhibitors and OC compounds are also very toxic to these insects, but their typical LD50s are one order of magnitude higher, in the range 0.2-1.8 µg/bee and 0.8-5.1 µg/bee respectively; toxicity of pirimiflum (LD50 0.7 µg/bee) and indoxacarb (LD50 1.3 µg/bee) is within the same range. Especially toxic (LD50 <0.1 µg/bee) among the OP and carbamate insecticides are the following compounds: bendiocarb, dicrotophos, diazinon, naled, omethoate, profenofos, pyridaphenthion, isoxathion, chlorothresuxfos and chlorpyrifos.

Dithiols and amitraz are not as toxic to honeybees as other neurotoxic insecticides (Figure 2b). The synergist piperonyl butoxide and PCP are also moderately toxic to bees, with LD50 of 11 and 48 µg/bee, respectively. Although some JHs can be very toxic to honeybees (i.e. hydroprene and methoprene), in general these and other IGR compounds are only moderately toxic to Hymenoptera, having LD50s in the range 30-150 µg/bee. Respiratory inhibitors of the electron transport system are much more toxic to bees than ATPase inhibitors, with typical LD50s between 1.6-24 µg/bee for the former group and 53-1070 µg/bee for the latter group. Indeed, the ATPase inhibitors are not used to control insects but rather used as acaricides. Stomach poisons and pheromone lures appear not to affect bees, although specific toxicity data for these chemicals are lacking (Table 1).

**Birds:** Data analysed here are for acute oral toxicity to a range of species based mainly on Mineau et al. [21] and the database sources indicated above. Birds are very sensitive to antagonist neurotoxic compounds such as cholinesterase inhibitors (carbamates and OPs), GABA-R inhibitors (OC and fipronil), nACh-R inhibitors (dithiols), sodium channel blockers (indoxacarb), as well as chlorfenapyr and fumigants [65]. Indeed, among the most toxic insecticides to birds (LD50 <10 mg/kg body weight) are the carbamates thiofanox, carbofuran, aldicarb, oxamyl, methiocarb and triazamate; the OPs isocarbophos, fenamiphos, monocrotophos, famphur, diclороfос, mevinphos, phosphamidon, diazinon, fenthion, parathion, EPN, coumaphos, phorate, ethoprophos, triazophos and terbufos; the dithiol thiocyclam (LD50 3.5 mg/kg), and the electron transport uncoupler chlorfenapyr (LD50 8.3 mg/kg). Fumigants toxicity is typically in the range 47-150 mg/kg b.w. (Figure 2c).

Less toxic to birds are the agonist neurotoxic insecticides of the GABA-R (avermectins), nACh-R (neonicotinoids and spinosad) and particularly those acting upon the sodium channel (pyrethroids and DDT). Thus, the typical LD50 range of the two former agonist groups is 490-930 mg/kg and 250-1690 mg/kg, respectively. Amitraz and PCP fit also in the same category, whereas pyrethroids are clearly non-toxic to birds (typical LD50 >2000 mg/kg). Apart from chlorfenapyr and DNOC (LD50 23 mg/kg), all other respiratory inhibitors present little hazards to birds (typical LD50 550-2000 mg/kg), especially the ATPase inhibitors, which are practically non-toxic to these animals. Equally, all IGRs, whether inhibitors or hormone mimics, as well as stomach poisons (e.g. toxins of Bacillus thuringiensis) and synergists are innocuous to birds.

**Mammals:** These data are for acute oral toxicity to mice and rats. Mammals are particularly sensitive to broad-spectrum insecticides such as cholinesterase inhibitors (carbamates and OPs) and agonists and antagonists of the GABA-R like avermectins, fipronil and OCs. Especially toxic (LD50 <10 mg/kg body weight) are the following compounds: aldicarb (0.9 mg/kg), oxamyl (2.8) and thiofanox (8.5) among the carbamates; and chlorothresuxfos (3.3), terbufos (3.5), phorate (3.8), tebuvinifos (5.5), disulfoton (6.6), chlorromphos (7.0), fenamiphos and parathion (8.0), mevinphos and sulfotep (10) among the OPs, avermectins have typical LD50s in the range 50-150 mg/kg, whereas OCs are typically between 130-400 mg/kg; the LD50 of fipronil is 96 mg/kg. Fumigants and PCP are also very toxic to mammals, in particular phosphine (40 mg/kg), but their typical LD50s are in the range 100-275 mg/kg.

All other neurotoxic insecticides are only moderately toxic to mammals, from dithiols (LD50 408 mg/kg) to amitraz (LD50 1125 mg/kg) and pyrethroids (typical LD50 250-4000 mg/kg). Respiratory inhibitors can be equally toxic (typical LD50 550-1200 mg/kg), and hydrogen cyanide (LD50 18 mg/kg) and DNOC (LD50 68 mg/kg) are particularly toxic.

Finally, acaricide ATPase inhibitors, the majority of synergists,
stomach poisons and all IGR compounds are quite harmless to mammals (Figure 2d).

Conclusions

It appears that the mode of action of insecticides is responsible for their higher or lower toxicity to non-target organisms. However, the large variations in susceptibility among different animal taxa suggest that certain biochemical traits particular to a group of organisms are responsible for a specific level of sensitivity. Aquatic arthropods are most susceptible to all types of insecticides because they share many physiological features with the target insects. Other aquatic organisms, such as fish and amphibians, are very sensitive to broad-spectrum neurotoxic and respiratory inhibitor insecticides, but not so much to selective insecticides such as IGRs and stomach poisons. Terrestrial vertebrates are also sensitive to most neurotoxicants and respiratory inhibitors, with the exception of those insecticides derived from natural toxins produced by plants or fungi (e.g. pyrethroids, neonicotinoids, avermectins, spinosad), which appear to have little or no toxicity in birds and mammals.

It is no coincidence that natural insecticides such as pyrethrum or nicotine, and their corresponding man-made derivatives, are less toxic to terrestrial animals than other neurotoxic substances such as OC, OP and carbamate insecticides. Firstly, the mode of action of the natural insecticides on their target receptor is typically agonistic, whereas that of the man-made products is more often antagonistic. Secondly, birds and mammals have evolved in environments where poisonous plants grow, producing seeds and fruits that may form part of the diet of those animals. Consequently, they have evolved and altered their neurophysiological mechanisms to cope with the possible threat of poisoning. By the same token, it is not surprising that the most toxic substances to organisms are the artificial, man-made insecticides, for which most organisms have been unable to counter the corresponding physiological traits that may counteract their effect.

References


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