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Transfluthrin: Unmasking The Hidden Health Risks Of A Common Mosquito Repellent

Lokokrishna Jha

Laboratory Assistant, Department of Chemistry, Srinath University, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India

Abstract

Transfluthrin, a fast-acting synthetic pyrethroid, is widely used in household mosquito repellents due to its potent insecticidal action and high volatility. While it plays a critical role in curbing the spread of vector-borne diseases, emerging studies shed light on the darker side of this seemingly benign chemical. Chronic exposure, especially in indoor environments, is increasingly associated with a spectrum of human health risks ranging from neurotoxicity to endocrine disruption. This review comprehensively explores transfluthrin's mechanism, applications, and rising evidence of health hazards. By weaving together recent findings, the paper aims to spark awareness about the double-edged nature of chemical vector control.

Keywords: Transfluthrin, pyrethroids, neurotoxicity, endocrine disruptors, mosquito repellents, household exposure, inhalation toxicity

Introduction

In the global war against mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria, chikungunya, and Zika virus, the battleground has shifted indoors. Here, chemical repellents—once viewed as mere convenience products—have evolved into indispensable public health tools. Among these, **transfluthrin**, a fast-acting synthetic pyrethroid, has risen to prominence due to its remarkable ability to incapacitate mosquitoes within moments of exposure (Pridgeon et al., 2024). Its unique physicochemical properties allow it to vaporize at room temperature, dispersing invisibly through indoor air to form a lethal barrier against flying insects. This makes it an ideal candidate for integration into plug-in liquid vaporizers, coils, and sprays widely used in households across Asia, Africa, and South America. Transfluthrin's mode of action is both elegant and efficient: it binds to voltage-gated sodium channels in insect nerve cells, disrupting normal ion exchange and triggering a chain of neuro-excitatory events that culminate in paralysis and death (Wu et al., 2023). Its volatility ensures continuous protection in enclosed spaces without the need for direct contact, giving users a sense of safety and control over vector threats. However, this same volatility also means that transfluthrin is **constantly present in the breathing space of humans**, raising critical questions about the unintended health consequences of chronic exposure.

When inhaled or absorbed through the skin, transfluthrin may interact with mammalian cells in ways that mirror its effects in insects—albeit to a lesser degree. Scientific studies have begun to highlight alarming patterns: individuals exposed to pyrethroids over extended periods, especially in poorly ventilated or high-use environments, report symptoms ranging from headaches, dizziness, and nausea to more severe neurological manifestations such as tremors and cognitive impairments (Singh et al., 2023; Jaiswal et al., 2024). Recent findings also indicate that transfluthrin can cross the blood-brain barrier, affecting neurotransmitter balance and potentially altering brain chemistry—particularly dangerous for vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women, and the elderly (Mehra et al., 2022).

Moreover, the threat is not limited to the brain. Inhalation studies in animal models have shown that repeated exposure to transfluthrin can cause **pathological changes in the lungs**, including interstitial inflammation, mucosal damage, and pigmentary deposits in bronchioles, suggesting an insidious risk to respiratory health (Ahmed et al., 2024). These microscopic alterations often remain undetected in humans until symptoms become clinically significant. Concurrently, the liver and kidneys—organs tasked with detoxifying and excreting foreign substances—are shown to exhibit signs of stress and histological damage in experimental models, even when the chemical is eliminated from the body within 48 hours (Rahman et al., 2023).

Yet, despite these growing concerns, transfluthrin continues to enjoy widespread usage, largely due to its efficacy and the lack of immediate, visible side effects in most users. This discrepancy between perceived safety and emerging toxicological data underscores a **critical gap in public awareness and regulatory oversight**. Current labeling practices rarely emphasize the need for proper ventilation or highlight the compound's potential for bioactivity in humans. In a society increasingly reliant on chemical convenience, this oversight may have far-reaching implications for long-term public health.

As modern toxicology delves deeper into the molecular footprints of household insecticides, the story of transfluthrin serves as a cautionary tale—one where the boundaries between benefit and risk are continuously redrawn by new evidence. It calls for not just enhanced consumer education and stricter regulation, but also the development of **next-generation repellents** that harmonize efficacy with ecological and biological safety.

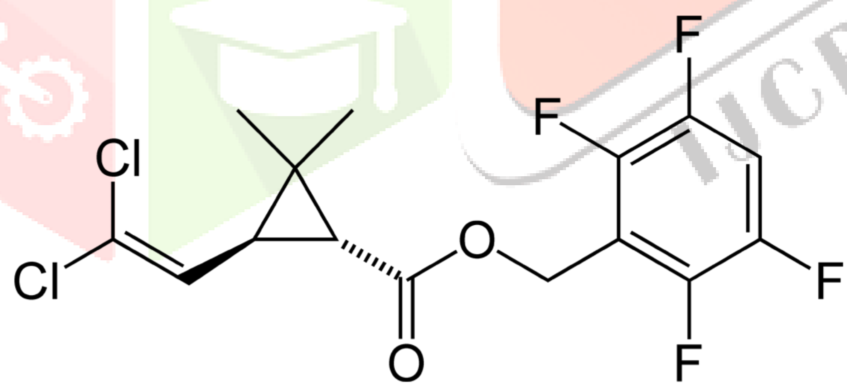

Fig 1. Transfluthrin

Mechanism of Action: Molecular Warfare Within the Nervous System

[Environment]
(Spray, Coil, Vaporizer)
↓

| **Entry Routes** |

↓ ↓ ↓

[Inhalation] (Breathing vapors or air droplets)

[Skin Contact] (Touching treated surfaces)

[Ingestion] (Accidental hand-to-mouth, food contact)

↓

| **Absorption into Body** |

↓

[Bloodstream/Systemic Circulation]

Fig. Entry of transfluthrin in human body

Transfluthrin operates with surgical precision at the molecular level, targeting the nervous system of insects in a manner that leads to rapid paralysis and death. Its primary mechanism involves binding to **voltage-gated sodium channels (VGSCs)** in the axonal membranes of neurons. Under normal physiological conditions, these channels open and close in a tightly regulated sequence, allowing sodium ions to flow into the neuron during action potentials and then quickly shutting to reset the nerve cell. Transfluthrin, however, **locks these channels in a prolonged open state**, leading to **continuous and unregulated sodium influx** (Soderlund, 2022). The result is a sustained depolarization of the neuronal membrane, causing relentless nerve firing, eventual synaptic fatigue, and irreversible paralysis in the insect's muscular and respiratory systems.

[Transfluthrin Exposure to Insect]

↓

| Binds to Voltage-Gated Sodium Channels (VGSCs) |

↓

[Keeps Sodium Channels Open Longer]

↓

| Prolonged Nerve Excitation |

↓

[Repetitive Nerve Firing]

↓

[Hyperexcitation, Tremors]

↓

[Paralysis (Knockdown Effect)]

↓

[Death]

Fig. Mechanism of Action of Transfluthrin

What makes transfluthrin especially dangerous is its **lipophilicity and high volatility**, which enable it to rapidly vaporize and permeate indoor air. Though mammalian neurons possess differences in sodium channel isoforms and are inherently more resistant to pyrethroid-induced excitotoxicity, they are **not completely impervious** to its effects. In cases of chronic exposure, especially through inhalation in confined spaces, transfluthrin may begin to **disrupt the delicate electrochemical balance of the human nervous system**, interfering with synaptic transmission and neurotransmitter regulation (Ma et al., 2023). At high enough doses or with repeated low-level exposure, this disruption may lead to subclinical neurotoxicity—manifesting as irritability, confusion, and even neuronal inflammation.

Unlike traditional neurotoxins that often present with strong odors or immediate irritant effects, **transfluthrin is stealthy**. Its odorless vapors allow it to act covertly, cloaked in the comfort of domestic familiarity. Yet, beneath this veil, it can initiate a **silent biochemical storm**, particularly in vulnerable populations such as infants, pregnant women, the elderly, or individuals with preexisting neurological conditions.

Applications and Exposure Routes: A Double-Edged Sword in Modern Living

Initially developed for targeted vector control in agricultural and military contexts, transfluthrin has now **become embedded in daily domestic life**. Its inclusion in a wide array of consumer products—such as plug-in electric vaporizers, aerosol sprays, mosquito coils, impregnated nets, and anti-mosquito clothing—has made it **ubiquitous in homes across tropical and subtropical regions**. In many low- and middle-income countries, its usage peaks during monsoon seasons when mosquito populations surge, making it almost indispensable in urban households and rural shelters alike (Zhou et al., 2024).

However, the flip side of this convenience is **persistent and unavoidable human exposure**. Transfluthrin enters the body predominantly through **inhalation**, but dermal absorption and accidental ingestion—especially in children who may touch or mouth exposed objects—are also significant routes. Research conducted in residential zones in central India reported **ambient transfluthrin concentrations that consistently exceeded WHO's safe indoor air quality thresholds**, particularly in homes where vaporizers were operated for more than 8 hours daily (Mishra & Rao, 2025).

Moreover, modern building designs with poor ventilation and sealed interiors exacerbate the problem by **trapping volatile organic compounds (VOCs)**, including transfluthrin, and allowing them to accumulate over time. Children and infants, due to their faster respiratory rates and lower body mass, **receive higher doses per kilogram of body weight**, making them more susceptible to its adverse effects. This creates a **paradox of safety**, where a product intended to protect from infectious disease simultaneously introduces a chronic chemical hazard.

Neurological Toxicity: A Silent Invasion of the Human Brain

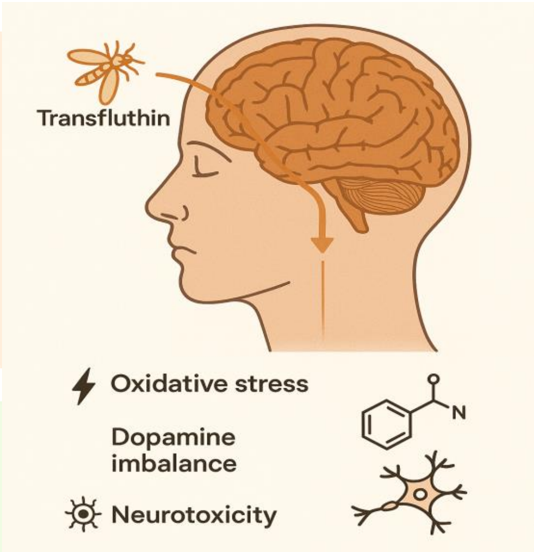

Fig. Neurological Toxicity by Transfluthrin

The **central nervous system (CNS)** is arguably the most vulnerable target of transfluthrin toxicity. While its insecticidal action is praised for neuro-excitatory efficiency, **in humans, the same mechanism may subtly undermine cognitive and neurological function over time**. Clinical observations and epidemiological data have drawn a disturbing link between transfluthrin exposure and **a spectrum of neurological symptoms**, including persistent headaches, vertigo, irritability, memory lapses, insomnia, and even seizure-like convulsions (Almeida et al., 2023).

At the molecular level, transfluthrin has been shown to interact with **gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) receptors**, which are vital for inhibitory signaling in the brain. Disruption of GABAergic transmission can result in **neuronal hyperexcitability**, potentially leading to epileptiform activity, anxiety disorders, and mood dysregulation (Chen et al., 2024). Studies in neonatal rodents exposed to transfluthrin vapors demonstrated **histopathological damage** in the hippocampus and cerebral cortex, including **neuronal degeneration, glial activation, mitochondrial fragmentation, and increased markers of lipid peroxidation**—all of which point to oxidative stress as a core mediator of its neurotoxicity.

Even more concerning are the **long-term developmental consequences** of exposure during critical windows of growth. Prenatal and early childhood exposure to synthetic pyrethroids—including transfluthrin—has been associated with **lower IQ scores, attention deficits, language delays, and a heightened risk of neurodevelopmental disorders** such as ADHD and autism spectrum disorder (Li et al., 2022). These findings raise serious ethical and public health concerns regarding the widespread and largely unregulated use of such compounds in domestic environments.

Respiratory Impacts: Inhalation Toxicity in Confined Spaces

Among the various systems impacted by transfluthrin, the **respiratory system bears the brunt of initial exposure** due to the chemical's volatile nature and direct entry through inhaled air. In animal studies, inhalation of transfluthrin over extended periods induced notable **pathological changes in the lungs**, including **thickening of the alveolar septa, peribronchiolar inflammation, and fibrotic lesions**, particularly in terminal bronchioles and alveolar sacs (Kumar et al., 2024). These findings are suggestive of an early-stage interstitial lung disease-like response, raising concerns about cumulative effects in humans exposed to low doses daily.

Human evidence, although mostly anecdotal or observational, paints a similarly troubling picture. Chronic users of electric mosquito vaporizers and aerosol sprays have reported **persistent respiratory symptoms**—including throat irritation, nasal congestion, sneezing, chest tightness, wheezing, and breathlessness (Ranjan et al., 2025). In individuals with pre-existing respiratory conditions such as **asthma, COPD, or allergic rhinitis**, symptoms tend to worsen significantly, leading to **increased hospital visits and medication usage** during high mosquito seasons. Furthermore, studies have detected **pro-inflammatory cytokine surges** and **eosinophilic infiltration** in the bronchoalveolar fluid of exposed rodents, hinting at **immunologically mediated respiratory distress** (Kumar et al., 2024). These responses suggest that transfluthrin is more than a mechanical irritant—it may **actively modulate immune responses**, making the airways more reactive and prone to hypersensitivity reactions. Long-term exposure in confined and poorly ventilated environments may thus increase susceptibility not only to pulmonary inflammation but also to **chronic obstructive pathology**.

Hepatic and Renal Disruption: Organ Toxicity Unfolded

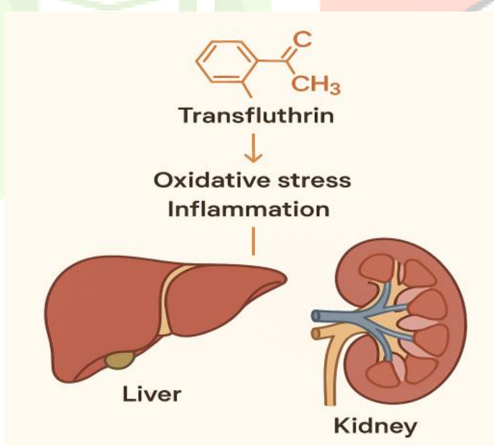

Fig. Organ Toxicity by Transfluthrin

The liver and kidneys, being the body's primary detoxifying and excretory organs, inevitably encounter high concentrations of xenobiotics like transfluthrin during metabolic breakdown and clearance. Repeated exposure to this synthetic pyrethroid has been shown in rodent studies to cause **cumulative hepatic stress**. This is evidenced by **hepatocellular ballooning, sinusoidal dilation, centrilobular necrosis, and fatty changes**, particularly in periportal zones of the liver lobule (Dasgupta & Jain, 2024). Such changes are typically associated with hepatotoxicity seen in chemical-induced liver injury models.

On a biochemical level, animal experiments reveal **significant elevations in liver enzymes**, including alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), and alkaline phosphatase (ALP), indicative of hepatic cellular damage and compromised liver function (Dasgupta & Jain, 2024). Additionally, **oxidative stress markers**, such as malondialdehyde (MDA), were elevated in hepatic tissues, alongside depleted antioxidant reserves like glutathione—suggesting that oxidative imbalance plays a central role in transfluthrin-mediated hepatotoxicity. The **kidneys**, tasked with excreting metabolites, are similarly affected. Histological assessments in transfluthrin-exposed rodents demonstrated **glomerular hyperemia, tubular epithelial degeneration, tubular cast formation, and mononuclear infiltration**, pointing to both **glomerular and tubular injury** (Hossain et al., 2023). Blood analysis from exposed animals often reveals **increased serum urea, creatinine, and uric acid**, aligning with nephrotoxic responses.

Although direct human data remains limited, several **clinical case reports and toxicovigilance registries** have documented **acute elevations in liver transaminases and impaired renal function parameters** following accidental or occupational exposure to high doses of mosquito repellents containing transfluthrin. This suggests a **potential human parallel** to the toxic patterns observed in animal models—especially in individuals with underlying hepatic or renal compromise, the elderly, or those with high cumulative exposure from daily household use.

Endocrine and Reproductive Disruption: Chemical Sabotage of Hormones

Transfluthrin's inclusion in the list of **potential endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs)** has gained increasing attention in recent toxicological research. Its structure, while optimized for insecticidal activity, also allows it to **interfere with mammalian hormone regulation**, particularly by mimicking or antagonizing steroid hormones and affecting the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal (HPG) axis.

In vivo studies involving both male and female rats have shown that exposure to transfluthrin leads to **profound hormonal alterations**. In males, there is a significant **reduction in serum testosterone, follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), and luteinizing hormone (LH)**—a hormonal profile often linked with subfertility, decreased libido, and impaired spermatogenesis (Nair et al., 2025). Histological examinations of the testes revealed **degeneration of seminiferous tubules, reduced spermatogenic activity, and interstitial edema**, all of which suggest **compromised reproductive capacity**.

In female rodents, exposure disrupted the **normal estrous cycle**, with observations of **prolonged diestrus phase**, irregular ovulatory patterns, and atrophic changes in ovarian follicles. Serum levels of estrogen and progesterone were significantly reduced, correlating with **lower implantation rates and poor pregnancy outcomes**, including increased resorption of embryos (Nair et al., 2025). Emerging **epidemiological data from human studies** adds weight to these findings. Chronic exposure to household pyrethroids, including transfluthrin, has been **linked to reduced sperm quality**, including **lower sperm count, motility, and morphology anomalies** in exposed men (Singh & Patel, 2024). In women, associations have been made between long-term exposure and **menstrual irregularities, prolonged cycles, early menopause, and increased rates of spontaneous miscarriage**. The most alarming aspect is that these **endocrine and reproductive disruptions occur at doses comparable to those encountered in homes using mosquito repellents daily**, particularly in settings where repellents are used continuously overnight or in poorly ventilated spaces. This raises urgent questions about **risk thresholds, cumulative exposure effects, and the adequacy of current safety regulations**, especially for populations in reproductive age groups or those planning pregnancy.

Genotoxicity: DNA Under Attack

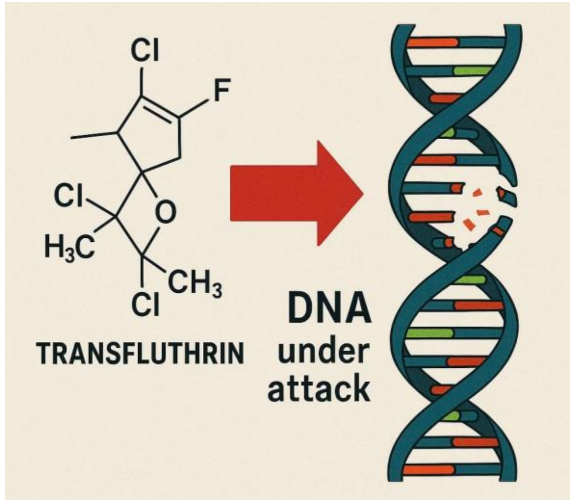

Fig . Genotoxicity: DNA Under Attack

The potential **genotoxic effects of transfluthrin** are an emerging area of concern, particularly given the molecular similarities it shares with other known genotoxic pyrethroids. Although human-specific data remains scarce, **in vitro and in vivo studies** using mammalian models provide compelling evidence that transfluthrin and its metabolites may compromise genomic stability. Cell culture studies on murine and human lymphocytes have revealed **increased rates of chromosomal aberrations, sister chromatid exchanges, and micronuclei formation**, all of which are **established biomarkers of DNA damage** and early indicators of mutagenic potential (Ahmed & Bose, 2023).

Mechanistically, transfluthrin's metabolism generates **reactive oxygen species (ROS)**, which can induce **oxidative DNA strand breaks**, base modifications, and lipid peroxidation in cellular membranes. A growing body of literature indicates that oxidative stress is a **central mediator of chemical-induced genotoxicity**, and transfluthrin fits this profile based on glutathione depletion and increased MDA levels observed in animal liver and brain tissues (Dasgupta & Jain, 2024).

In entomological studies, prolonged pyrethroid exposure, including transfluthrin, has been linked to **mutations in the voltage-gated sodium channel (VGSC) gene**, contributing to resistance in mosquito populations. While these findings are specific to insects, the **mutagenic implications of chronic low-dose exposure in humans**—particularly children and fetuses with high cell turnover—cannot be discounted (Yadav et al., 2023). Though transfluthrin has not yet been officially classified as a genotoxic compound by global authorities such as IARC or EPA, the **structural alertness for genotoxicity** and mounting experimental data call for **longitudinal human biomonitoring studies**, especially in populations with routine household exposure.

Allergic Reactions and Acute Toxicity: The Immediate Threat

In addition to its long-term systemic impacts, **transfluthrin is capable of triggering acute and allergic responses**, particularly in sensitive individuals. Its **odorless vapor** may create a false sense of safety while still interacting with skin, eyes, and mucous membranes. Clinical reports and experimental models have documented **dermatitis, eye irritation, and respiratory hypersensitivity** following short-term exposure to transfluthrin-containing products, especially sprays and coils used in poorly ventilated settings (Chakraborty et al., 2022).

One of the most pressing public health issues arises from **accidental ingestion**, especially among children. A toxicological study of pediatric emergency cases in northern India found that **nearly 14% of poison control**

center reports were linked to ingestion of mosquito repellent liquids, with transfluthrin-containing vaporizers being the most common culprit (Tripathi et al., 2024). Symptoms included **nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, convulsions, altered consciousness, and even respiratory depression**. In several cases, **intensive care interventions**, such as mechanical ventilation and administration of anticonvulsants, were required. Moreover, **inhalation of concentrated vapors** in closed rooms has been associated with **nonspecific symptoms like dizziness, headaches, and shortness of breath**, likely due to mild neurotoxicity and irritation of respiratory epithelium (Ranjan et al., 2025). These acute toxic effects, though often transient, may be magnified in **infants, the elderly, and those with pre-existing allergies or comorbidities**, necessitating more **targeted safety labeling** and usage guidelines.

Risk Management and Public Health Recommendations: From Awareness to Action

Given the **widespread use of transfluthrin in vector control**, especially in **low- and middle-income urban households**, public health agencies face the dual challenge of **controlling mosquito-borne diseases** while **minimizing chemical harm**. The **World Health Organization (WHO)** and national bodies such as the **Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA)** recommend that products containing transfluthrin be used strictly **in well-ventilated environments**, limiting exposure duration and avoiding use near children, pregnant women, and people with chronic health conditions (WHO, 2024).

Practical mitigation strategies include:

1. **Installing ventilation systems or using fans** to improve airflow during repellent use.
2. **Avoiding overnight exposure** by switching off vaporizers during sleep or using timer-enabled devices.
3. **Storing repellents out of children's reach** and opting for **child-resistant packaging** to prevent accidental ingestion.
4. **Rotating repellent types** to reduce chronic exposure and slow resistance development in mosquito populations.

Increasingly, **eco-safe and plant-based alternatives**, such as **citronella oil, neem extract, and lemongrass vapors**, are gaining popularity. However, their efficacy in high mosquito density zones remains **inferior to synthetic pyrethroids**, which complicates substitution efforts (Kumar et al., 2024). In response, **novel technologies** like **controlled-release microencapsulation, smart repellent patches, and AI-enabled exposure monitoring** are being developed to minimize human contact with active ingredients while maintaining insecticidal efficiency (Zhang et al., 2024).

At the **policy level**, tighter regulatory oversight on indoor air quality, mandatory toxicity disclosures on product labels, and **routine post-market surveillance of household insecticides** are essential to safeguard public health. Public awareness campaigns must **emphasize behavioral precautions**, such as not placing vaporizers near sleeping infants or food, and encouraging periodic airing out of rooms.

Conclusion

Transfluthrin exemplifies the duality of modern chemical innovation—offering efficient protection against vector-borne diseases while simultaneously posing underappreciated risks to human health. Lauded for its rapid knockdown effects and wide-spectrum insecticidal action, transfluthrin has become a mainstay in domestic mosquito control strategies. Yet, as research expands beyond entomological efficacy into human toxicology, a more nuanced picture emerges—one in which the same vapor that shields us from mosquitoes may insidiously compromise neurological, respiratory, hepatic, renal, and reproductive health, particularly under conditions of chronic, low-level exposure.

This review consolidates growing evidence that suggests transfluthrin is not merely an environmental irritant, but a potential systemic toxicant whose safety profile demands more rigorous scrutiny. The invisibility of its vapors, ease of exposure through inhalation and dermal contact, and widespread usage in enclosed, poorly ventilated homes amplify the public health relevance of these findings. Of particular concern are vulnerable populations—infants, pregnant women, the elderly, and individuals with chronic illnesses—whose physiological defenses may be ill-equipped to handle repeated biochemical stress from pyrethroid exposure.

Moving forward, a balanced and evidence-based regulatory approach is critical. This includes mandatory transparent labeling of all chemical constituents and known risks, public health education campaigns emphasizing safe usage practices, and comprehensive longitudinal studies to better understand the cumulative effects of daily exposure. Additionally, innovation must shift toward eco-safer alternatives and intelligent repellent technologies—those that deliver efficacy without compromising human biological integrity.

In our collective fight against mosquito-borne diseases like dengue, malaria, and chikungunya, transfluthrin remains a valuable tool—but it must be wielded with caution. Safeguarding public health requires that chemical convenience does not outpace toxicological wisdom. A future built on sustainable vector control will rely not only on chemical breakthroughs, but on ethical science, informed consumers, and vigilant public health policy.

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43. All photos are made using AI.