



**MAIN PICTURE:** Madeleine Barnard and Cobus van Bosch at their home in Cape Town. They were badly affected by methyl bromide fumes from their neighbour's house, which was fumigated to protect it from termites and wood-borer.

Exclusive



## THE DANGERS OF DIY PEST-CONTROL

Many people use home remedies for pesky insects because they think they're safer but it's a dangerous myth, poisons expert Dr Gerhard Verdoorn says.

"I'm opposed in principle to all home remedies and homemade pesticides. That's how poisoning often happens – because people have no idea of chemistry.

"It's against the law to recommend all sorts of muti if it hasn't been registered as a poison. For example people make cockroach poison from boric acid and other stuff and believe me there is trouble when kids or pets ingest it.

"Another favourite is tobacco for everything under the sun that people want to get rid of. It's illegal, irresponsible and the nicotine in it causes cancer."

Soap-based remedies should also be avoided because they're bad for the environment.

If you choose to deal with pests yourself buy only registered

products in their original packaging and carefully follow the instructions for safe use, says Anzelle van Niekerk of the South African Pest Control Association (Sapca).

"Our biggest problem is that people don't read the instructions. They spray and when the dog or cat dies the product is blamed. Rather use products that don't contain organophosphates (such as chlorpyrifos) and enquire about products that contain safer active ingredients."

If you fumigate your home with a commonly available product you must ventilate the room for three hours and wait another half-hour before entering. Using other sprays immediately afterwards won't harm your health.

■ If you are unsure about the safety of a product or service SMS Dr Verdoorn on 082-446-8946.

■ Call Sapca on 012-654-7708 or go to the website at [sapca.org.za](http://sapca.org.za).

had too much to drink," she says.

Cobus, an artist and journalist, also had problems with his vision and experienced hallucinations and strange dreams.

Madeleine, a freelance writer and singer, says her brain was too fuzzy to focus on work. They were also constantly tired and listless.

"We were both very forgetful, our speech was slurred and sometimes we would think one thing and say something completely different," she says.

Methyl bromide is a poison that directly affects the nervous system. It also affects the skin, breathing and muscles.

When Madeleine tried to sleep at night it felt as if someone was sticking hot needles into her body, she says.

She has had bad flu twice since the incident and was recently in hospital with a high fever. She is also recovering from measles.

"It's as though my immune

system has been weakened. I'm starting to wonder whether these symptoms will ever go away because some experts say the damage from methyl bromide poisoning can be permanent while others say some symptoms can appear only months later."

Madeleine and Cobus have reported the pest-control company to the municipality's health inspectors and the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which oversees poisonous substances in South Africa.

Most upsetting of all is that

such a lethal gas should even be used domestically, Madeleine says.

Most Western countries have in fact phased it out because it is so dangerous and extremely damaging to Earth's ozone layer.

South Africa has an agreement with the United Nations to ban the use of methyl bromide from 1 January 2010, poisons expert Dr Gerhard Verdoorn says. "But we and a few other developing countries have been given a postponement until 2015.

"Alternative products must

first be developed and registered otherwise we'll be in a situation where certain pests and plagues can't be controlled," he explains. Farmers especially depend on methyl bromide."

Treatment with methyl bromide is still the only method to exterminate wood-borer and termites permanently, says Anzelle van Niekerk of the South African Pest Control Association (Sapca). Sapca offers training programmes on the safe use of poisonous gases and other pesticides.

Dr Verdoorn says pest-control companies that act irresponsibly should be severely punished. "Pesticides don't poison people – it's people who poison other people with pesticides."

Madeleine will always be grateful Grietjie saved them. "Like canaries in the coal mines of old she gave us an early warning. She was a special cat." □

■ You can comment on this article at [www.you.co.za](http://www.you.co.za).

### IF YOU HAVE YOUR HOUSE FUMIGATED

- Make sure the pest-controllers know what they're doing and have permission to use the poisons. You can get this information from the SA Pest Control Association.
- Ask which poison will be used and in what dosages.
- Find out which foods you must remove and ensure your house is tightly sealed before the fumigation begins.
- Be well-informed about how to ventilate the house after the fumigation.
- If you feel ill after the fumigation go to a doctor immediately.