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Aflatoxins – the invisible threat in foods and feeds
Ranajit Bandyopadhyay

The Facts
Aflatoxins are highly toxic fungal metabolites causing suppression of the immune system, growth retardation, liver cancer, and even death in humans and domestic animals. Aflatoxins also affect the rate of recovery from protein malnutrition, Kwashiorkor (Hendrickse, 1984), and exert severe nutritional interference, including in protein synthesis, modification of micronutrients, and uptake of vitamin A and D. Exposure in animals reduces milk and egg yields. The contamination of milk and meat is passed on to humans.

Aflatoxins affect cereals, oilseeds, spices, tree nuts, milk, meat, and dried fruits. Maize and groundnut are major sources of human exposure because of their higher susceptibility to contamination and frequent consumption. The toxins are most prevalent within developing countries in tropical regions and the problem is expected to be further exacerbated by climate change (Cotty and Jaime-Garcia, 2007).

The aflatoxin-producing fungi (Aspergillus spp.) come in contact with crops in the field during crop development. They stay with the crops until their final use. If the environment where crops are stored is humid and warm, the fungi, which moved into storage with the crops, can proliferate and produce more aflatoxins. Aspergillus communities in different regions differ in their aflatoxin-producing ability. In some locations, they produce large concentrations; in others, they produce relatively lower amounts.

The high incidence of aflatoxin throughout Sub-Saharan Africa aggravates an already food insecure situation. Agricultural productivity is hampered by contamination, compromising food availability, access, and utilization. Unless aflatoxins in crops and livestock are effectively managed, marketable production and food safety cannot improve. Thus, the economic benefits of increased trade cannot be achieved. Aflatoxins cost farmers and countries hundreds of millions of dollars annually. These losses have caused crops to be moved out of regions, companies to go bankrupt, and entire agricultural communities to lose stability. Additionally, effective control must be achieved before many development activities aimed at achieving food security can be implemented, such as local food procurement strategies complementing food aid and school feeding programs, and ready-to-use therapeutic foods.

Aflatoxin Management
Contamination occurs before and after crop maturity. To ensure the greatest crop value and the lowest exposure of humans to aflatoxins, management must extend from field to fork. Currently, contamination is prevented by a combination of tools, such as post-harvest drying (where cost-effective), proper storage, shelling, de-hulling, sorting, early harvest, using regionally adjusted planting dates, and insect control. Pre-harvest management is unreliable. In 1989, farmers in the USA formed the Multi-crop Aflatoxin Working Group and joined with the US Department of Agriculture to increase research on aflatoxin management with an emphasis on breeding and transgenic crops. When the program was discontinued in 2008, commercially useful resistant crops still had not been developed, but there was an unexpected advance.

Biocontrol – a novel approach
A biological control technique greatly reduced aflatoxins in all the susceptible crops in a cost-effective manner and over a broad geographic area. Native strains of A. flavus that do not produce aflatoxins (“atoxigenic strains”) are used to competitively exclude aflatoxin-producing strains from the crop environment.
A technology highly suitable and beneficial for small producers in Africa

Biocontrol in the field has proved a useful method for preventing aflatoxin contamination in maize and groundnut. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) conducted trials in Nigeria. Native atoxigenic strains reduced contamination by up to 99%. The National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) gave IITA provisional registration to begin testing of the inoculum of a mixture of four strains under the trade name aflasafe™. In 2009, maize farmers who applied aflasafe™ achieved, on average, an 80% reduction in aflatoxin contamination at harvest and a 90% after storage. Private and public sector engagement is now necessary to introduce the technology country-wide and at regional level, as with the widely used AF36 and Afia-Guard™ products in the USA.

About the author

Ranajit Bandyopadhyay is a plant pathologist at IITA based in Ibadan, Nigeria. He is responsible for IITA’s Africa-wide research and development activities related to diseases of maize, soybean, cowpea, cassava, banana, and yam. His current research on mycotoxins focuses on developing an understanding of their occurrence, the bi-ecology of toxigenic fungi, policy and institutional issues, and methods to manage mycotoxins with focus on biological control. He is the Program Coordinator, IITA.

Further reading: