

Word for Word

“Toxicity” vs. “toxic effect”: Which is better?

Is it correct to use the word *toxicity* when referring to a treatment’s toxic effect in the body? Consider these sentences:

The most common toxicities reported were fatigue and diarrhea.
No grade 3 toxicities occurred.

According to the *AMA Manual of Style*, such usage is incorrect. As the manual explains, “Toxicity is the quality, state, or degree of being poisonous. A patient is not toxic. A patient does not have toxicity.”¹ Preferred wording would be *toxic effect*, *toxic reaction*, or *adverse effect*.

Preferred:

The most common toxic reactions reported were fatigue and diarrhea.
No grade 3 toxic effects occurred.
The toxicity of the drug combination was studied.

In practice, the use of *toxicity* to mean *toxic effect* has become more frequent since we wrote [a posting about this topic](#) a decade ago. We suspect that the common usage will eventually be considered acceptable by the *AMA Manual*. In the meantime, because this manual is the leading stylebook for biomedical publishing, and because many journals adhere to it, we recommend following its guidance to use *toxic effect*. However, if you choose to use *toxicity*, you won’t be misunderstood.

Reference

1. Frey T, Young RK. Correct and preferred usage. In *AMA Manual of Style*, 11th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2020. Accessed May 15, 2023.
<https://academic.oup.com/amamanualofstyle/book/27941/chapter/207567296>

—Sunita Patterson