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Eating Some Fish A Hazard

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NEW YORK — Spring more than any other season, is usually celebrated by fish-loving gastronomes for its early runs of shad and their highly prized roe, and for the abundance of striped bass.

In addition, the seasonal demand for freshwater species such as carp, pike and whitefish is greatly increased, since those fish are prime ingredients of golfite fish, traditionally served during Passover.

IF THE public has suddenly become apprehensive about eating those fish, there is every reason for the concern. Given the recently publicized facts about contamination of the Hudson River by the industrial chemical and suspected carcinogen polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), the arguments among scientists about what safe levels of those chemicals are, the difficulty in telling where fish in stores comes from, and the migratory habits of freshwater fish that spawn in the Hudson and then go out to sea where they are caught, the only entirely safe course is to forego such fish, pending further findings.

Robert H. Boyle, a devoted Hudson River sports fisherman who reported in 1970 on finding high levels of PCB's in striped bass from the river, said, "Shopping in a fish market these days is like picking your way through a minefield, and it's a shame. Fish is great food — lean, good protein and delicious."

MOST of the evidence concerning the effects of PCB's has been arrived at through experiments done on laboratory animals. After a series of relatively low-level dosages, female rhesus monkeys were found to lose some of their reproductive faculties. Considerably higher levels were needed to cause liver cancer in rats. Mink are especially susceptible. In 1971 the Campbell Soup Co. detected high levels of PCB's — 26.3 parts per million — in chickens purchased in New York State; as a result, 140,450 chickens were destroyed.

As for humans, more than 1,000 people in Japan suffered PCB poisoning in 1968 after eating contaminated rice oil. The people suffered from fatigue, headaches, pain in the joints, anemia, acne-form eruptions, pigmentation changes and swelling of the eyelids. It was also found that pregnant women in the group retained PCB's in their fatty tissues and, that, presumably as a result, nine out of 19 babies born alive had unusually grayish skin and were born underweight.

Environmental Science & Technology magazine reported last month that blood tests among the rice oil patients made in 1973 and 1974 showed that PCB levels in the most affected group was generally 7.2 parts per million.

In another incident, the General Electric Co. reported last November that at least 65 of its employees in two plants in upstate New York had become ill over a 15-year period under conditions that might have been aggravated by PCB exposure.

UNTIL August 1975, little was done about the Hudson's PCB contamination, which resulted mainly from discharges from the two General Electric plants — at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls. At that time, the State Commissioner of Environmental Conservation, Ogden R. Reid, ordered tests that showed an alarmingly high concentration of PCB's, far above the permissible Food and Drug Administration limits of 5 ppm.

As a result of Reid's findings, Robert P. Whalen, the State Commissioner of Health, issued orders last month forbidding all fishing between Fort Edward and the Troy Dam. He also prohibited the consumption of all eel from the river and advised that public intake of river fish be limited to one portion per week and suggested that infants and pregnant women not eat any fish from the river. Shad was an exception to the order, pending adequate testing of the new spring run.

Boyle, a senior writer for Sports Illustrated who has written widely about the Hudson, said that he had submitted fish samples to a laboratory for analysis.

"The lab found a concentration of 11 parts per million in striped bass eggs and 4 ppm in the flesh," Boyle said. "I'm not about to eat striped bass or any other fish from the Hudson River, the Finger Lakes or Lake George. I do eat large mouth bass and sunfish and other such fish that I catch myself away from any human drainage systems."