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Now it's PCB

The latest thing to agitate the more excitable environmentalists is a tongue twister called polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB for short.

A persistent, toxic compound, PCB is used in various industrial and household products. Lately the Food and Drug Administration has been concerned about "unacceptably high levels" of PCB in certain cereals and noodles.

Agitation multiplied when Michigan found PCB in Lake Michigan's spawning salmon— and the inevitable scare headlines blossomed.

Well, is PCB a genuine, worrisome threat to the health or well-being of Americans generally?

Truth is, no one can say for sure — and the best advice at this point seems to be: Don't lose any sleep over it.

As in most cases, the FDA's "acceptable level" of PCB is cautiously low and more speculative than scientific.

While it has sought to discourage use of PCB where it might get into foodstuffs, the FDA neither identified nor withdrew from shelves the cereals and noodles in which the chemical was detected.

Further, FDA Commissioner Charles Edwards has charged "alarmists seeking headlines" with inflatin the PCB problem.

There's quaint irony in one aspect of this new PCB hassle. FDA tests have indicated that PCB may be getting into foods which are packaged in boxes made of recycled paper — one rage among environmentalists. Evidently the PCB comes from a special kind of carbon paper used in business forms.

Thus a new dilemna. Should we stop recycling pape for the sake of food purity, letting trees be cut again? Or should we conclude that PCB, after all, isn't that big a threat to health?

No reasoned judgment based on adequate relevant facts is yet possible, regardless of faddist cries of alarm. Until exacting, thorough tests give clear proof of PCB's peril, we might as well go right on eating Shreddies, noodles and Michigan salmon without fear.

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