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PCB linked to deaths, cancer

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Although it's been in commercial production for 50 years, PCB didn't acquire its nasty reputation until 1968.

That was the year five Japanese died and thousands more became ill after using cooking oil contaminated by PCB.

What Japanese called "Yusho" poisoning caused acne-like skin eruptions, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, swollen eyelids, eye discharges, swollen and painful joints, numbness in the limbs, coughing, jaundice and general fatigue.

PREGNANT WOMEN exposed to the PCB-poisoned cooking oil gave birth to children with greyish-brown discolored skin, delayed tooth development and below-average weight.

Scientists say long-term exposure to small amounts of the chemical may weaken the body's ability to recover from illnesses. And PCB fed to laboratory animals, in amounts greater than the 5 parts-per-million allowed humans, interfered with their reproduction.

In 1976, PCB was pinpointed as a cause of several industrial cancer deaths. Mobil Corp. found that seven of 92 workers exposed to the chemical from 1953 to 1956 at its Paulsboro, N.J., refinery, had developed cancer.

Six of those persons were dead — two of the deaths directly linked to PCB.

AND MONSANTO Industrial Cemicals Co., the only U.S. manufacturer of PCB, found that an abnormally high number of deceased workers had died from lung cancer.

Production of PCB ended in 1977, and General Electric — principal user of the product — said it would switch to a safe substitute for its transformers and capacitors.

But the EPA estimates half of all Americans carry PCBs in their fatty tissues.

And human milk, with its high percentage of fat, has particularly high levels of PCBs, said a University of Wisconsin report. Breast-fed infants receive more than 80 times the concentration of PCBs in food eaten by their mothers.

IN RIVERS and streams, PCB is taken in by fish — particularly carp — through their gills, fins and skin, a University of Wisconsin study said.

The chemical also adheres to small particles in the water and is taken in by lower forms of aquatic life, which are eaten by consecutively larger forms of life, until they reach fish-eating animals — and man.