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Peril in Red Dye

A congressional study reported yesterday for the first time that the country's most widely used food coloring—Red Dye No. 2—has been linked to genetic damage in test animals. At the same time, the Environmental Protection Agency revealed that poisonous, almost indestructible industrial chemicals called PCBs are widely contaminating the environment—including some drinking water.

The report on PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—comes three years after the government thought it had the chemicals "well in hand," the agency said. PCBs at certain levels can cause serious toxic effects in humans. They threaten the food chain and, according to a recent unpublished report cited by the agency, malignant liver tumors developed in rats exposed to one part per 100 billion of a particular PCB.

In the report on Red Dye No. 2, the Food and Drug Administration said its evaluation indicates that the dye poses no discernable risk to the consumer. But the report said tests made in 1972 and evaluated earlier this year showed the dye was "potentially mutagenic" in test animals, and added that continued use of the dye—which is found in everything from strawberry ice cream to lipstick—without resolution of the safety questions is exposing "the public to unnecessary risk." The report, by the General Accounting office, recommended that the Food and Drug Administration, which has been studying the issue for 15 years, "act promptly to establish the safety of Red No. 2 or prevent its use in foods, drugs and cosmetics."

On the question of PCBs, John Buckley, a former EPA official, has told Congress that high levels recently reported in the Great Lakes area, the Hudson River Valley and elsewhere show that "concentrations are higher than previously believed." The PCB problem "will not be adequately resolved" unless Congress empowers the EPA to regulate manufacture and importation of substances such as PCBs by passing the proposed Toxic Substances Control Act, said Buckley, who endorsed the bill in behalf of the agency.

Introduced about 1930, PCBs have been used mainly as cooling fluids in electrical transformers and other equipment, as fluids for electromagnets, as heat-transfer fluids, as hydraulic oil, and as plasticizers for waxes and adhesives. They also are used in paints, printing inks, carbonless "carbon" paper, and other products.

Because PCBs are almost indestructible, they persist in the environment when they leak into it from products that contain or are exposed to them, or enter as solid wastes from manufacturing, as water effluents or as air emissions.

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