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Engineers 'not concerned' about Hudson PCBs

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NEWBURGH—Engineers at towns and institutions which draw their drinking water from the Hudson River said this week they are not concerned about reports of minute amounts of polychlorinated bipheynls, or PCBs, in the water.

The chemicals, which have been found in unsafe concentrations in river fish, may be cancer-causing, according to researchers who have fed small amounts of PCBs to monkeys and other mammals.

The New York State Dept. of Health, however, has indicated that the amounts found in the treated drinking water is safe.

Samuel Syrotynski, of the Bureau of Public Water Supply, said in a recent interview that the EPA guidelines state that the level of PCBs in drinking water should not exceed one part per billion.

A series of tests in August found .12 parts per billion in drinking water in Port Ewen, .02 in Rhinebeck, .02 in the City of Poughkeepsie, .08 at the Hudson River State Hospital in Poughkeepsie, .01 in Highland and .05 at the Veteran's Hospital at Castle Point.

While the effects of short-term high doses of PCBs on humans has been documented in at least one case in Japan, Syrotynski said, scientists have no idea what the long- term effects of small doses of the chemical are.

While the health department has found the water safe, Syrotynski said there is a need for continued sampling of the waters in the Hudson. Unfortunately, he added, the health department does not have the funds to do the tests now.

In the one case of acute PCB poisoning, more than 1,000 Japanese people became ill after PCBs contaminated their rice oil in concentrations of about 2,000 parts per million.

Among the symptoms were chloracne, a form of skin acne, visual disturbances, head aches, fever and gastro-intestinal problems.

According to John Harris-Cronin of the People's Pipewatch in Poughkeepsie, no one knows what the long term effects of the chemicals are.

Two of the chemicals' properties add to its dangers, Harris-Cronin said. First it is highly resistant to decomposition and tends to stay in the environment for a long period of time. Second it tends to accumulate in the fatty tissues of the body.

Paul Sherman, a spokesman for the State Attorney Generals Office, recently said that experiments at the University of Wisconsin Medical School showed that relatively low levels of PCBs given to Rhesus monkeys can produce harmful effects. Sherman said the monkeys suffered weight loss, skin conditions and hair loss and one monkey died when they were given PCB doses of 2.5 parts per million over a two-month period.

Other experiments in minks and rats have shown the chemicals can cause harm to the lymphatic system, the liver and gastro-intestinal areas.

Sherman said researchers estimate that more than 40 per cent of the people in this country have some amount of PCBs in their bodies.

"PCBs are ubiquitous," he said. "They've been found almost everywhere, including a lot of places where they have no reasson to be."

He said PCBs have been found in fish, dairy and poultry products because those animals may feed on other organisms in the food chain which have high concentrations of the chemicals. "The situation is a scary one because we have no controls on these chemicals," he added.

Willard Rivenburgh acting City of Poughkeepsie engineer said the 60,000 water drinkers in the Poughkeepsie area are drinking water that has been treated with activated carbons recommended by the state.

According to Syrotynski health department figures show that in June, 1974 raw water in the Poughkeepsie area had a level of 1.1 parts per billion of PCBs before treatment and a level of .1 per billion after treatment. In August 1975 the raw water showed a level of .1 and the treated water was .02 parts per billion.

Dominick Pallidion, town clerk of Highland said about 2,000 to 2,500 people there drink water from the Hudson when the town's reservoirs are not in use.

"That's most of the time," he said.

The August tests showed the town's raw water PCB level at .04 and .01 after treatment.

A major source of PCBs in the Hudson is General Electric's plants at Hudson Falls and Fort Edwards. Accordingly the United Electrical Workers Union has taken an interest in the effects of PCBs on its workers.

The spokesman said the union is intitiating extensive tests on a number of union members.

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