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On breast-feeding

A panel of federal and private health specialists has been accused of being "very misleading" in concluding that mothers can continue to breast-feed their babies despite contamination of their milk by a toxic industrial chemical called PCBs.

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare Committee to Coordinate Toxicology on PCBs in Mothers' Milk "failed to adequately deal with the issue" at a meeting in Washington Sept. 23, according to a joint statement by Dr. Joseph Highland of the Environmental Defense Fund and Stephanie Harris of the Health Research Group.

PCBs, which concentrate in fatty tissue and remain there for years, first came into wide use in the 1930s, mainly in electrical equipment. Not until the mid-1960s did researchers discover that PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — had contaminated the air, waters and soil of all industrialized countries. Last week, Monsanto Chemical Co., the only American manufacturer, announced that it was ending production.

HEW convened the committee after the Environmental Protection Agency had reported finding PCBs in 79 of 80 samples of milk fat from mothers in 11 states. The average concentration was 1.8 parts per million. In baby rhesus monkeys nursed by their mothers with milk contaminated by as little as 4 to 6 ppm, skin discoloration and other adverse effects occurred. The babies improved when weaned, but behavioral and learning deficiencies persisted for at least a year.

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