

Despite PCBs, Experts Approve Breast-Feeding

By Victor Cohn

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Federal and private health specialists concluded yesterday that American mothers can continue to breast-feed their babies despite the presence of traces of industrial chemical called PCBs in mothers' milk sampled in 11 states.

But the specialists—meeting at the National Institutes of Health to consider the new public health problem—called for immediate studies to find out whether the PCBs are doing babies any harm.

Pointing to newly disclosed effects in infant monkeys, they said the effort should include research to see whether even low PCB levels in a baby's diet might cause later learning disabilities or hyperactivity.

Both of these effects appeared in monkeys whose mothers' milk contained PCB levels not far above some found in 79 of the 80 mothers sampled in 11 states.

Several federal officials also advised pregnant women, as well as all girls or women who expect to have babies some day, to avoid eating any sport fish identified by authorities as PCB carriers.

The officials addressed this recommendation even to girls because PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—lodge in human, or other animal, fat and once there remain for many years.

PCBs first came into wide industrial use in the 1930s. Their largest use today is in electrical machinery.

Only since the mid-1960s has it been learned that they have widely contaminated the entire industrial world's air, waters and soil.

The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday reported that the chemicals have now been found in amounts ranging from traces up to potentially harmful in 79 out of 80 1974 and 1975 nursing mother's milk samples in 11 states. EPA added Indiana to the list, though only one Indiana result was available—3.2 parts of PCB per million in the milk fat.

The average amount found in milk fat in the 11 states was 1.8 parts. The other 10 states are Virginia, Maryland, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Tennessee. Among those 10 states the highest average level, 2.6 parts, was found in North Carolina.

EPA officials also reported that PCB levels had been low and falling in foods other than some fish and nonexistent recently in prepared infant foods.

Though no effects have been seen in human beings, none has been looked for, Dr. David P. Rall said, and "this is what we have to do now, and efforts have already started." Rall is director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

"Roughly 51 per cent of us have one to two parts per million of PCBs in our blood now," said Thomas Kopp of EPA. "They're going to be in us for years."

Levels like 1.8 are called not much more than a trace. But Dr. James Allen of the University of Wisconsin told of studies on rhesus monkeys in which there were untoward effects on babies whose mothers' milk fat contained as little as 4 to 6 parts per million of PCBs.

Although none of the PCB averages in mothers' milk fat in the 11 states reached those levels, the amount in some individual mothers' milk did.