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Chemical thought safe does cause problems in monkeys

MADISON, Wis. (AP)—Levels of a widely used chemical that are considered safe for humans cause reproduction problems in monkeys when consistently added to their diets, University of Wisconsin scientists have found.

Deborah Barsotti and James Allen of the UW-Madison Pathology Department found that female rhesus monkeys have trouble mating when polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were added to their diets both at the level considered safe for humans and at half that level.

Their findings were reported Friday at a meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology in Atlantic City, N.J.

The UW said their research was the first indication that PCB levels permissible in human foods affect the reproduction of lower primates.

"The monkeys' response to PCBs are quite similar and their reproduction cycles are quite similar to humans," Allen said.

PCBs are common industrial chemicals that until recently were widely used in paint, newsprint, electrical transformers and other products from which they could readily find their way into the environment, he said.

Allen said they were used for 40 years without consideration to limiting their escape into the environment. Then high levels of PCBs were found to cause cancer in experimental animals, and the uses of the chemical were reduced.

Samples of fish taken from Lake Michigan have sometimes exceeded the levels of PCB considered safe by the Food and Drug Administration.

"If a man were to consume a diet totally of coho salmon for a month, he'd be likely to show symptoms of PCB toxication," Allen said. "Of course, that isn't likely."

The PCB level considered safe by the FDA in fish and poultry is five parts per million.

Five of eight female rhesus monkeys fed a diet containing half that amount for six months were unable to mate with normal males, while other one of eight fed the full five parts per million for six months was capable of reproducing, the researchers found.

"We have not reached a level at which we know they're safe," Allen said.

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