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FDA Sets Final Rules To Curb Use of PCBs In Food, Related Plants

Its Regulations Seek to Prevent Excessive Exposure to Chemical That May Be Harmful to Man

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WASHINGTON – The Food and Drug Administration issued final regulations restricting polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs in feed, food and food-packaging materials.

The limitations, originally proposed last year, are designed to prevent contamination of food with the chemical, which in high concentrations has caused liver damage and other harmful effects in test animals. Government experts say the risk to humans of long-term, low-level exposure isn't known, but restrictions are considered necessary to head off any possible future hazards.

PCBs persist in the environment, so if limitations aren't imposed they could build up larger concentrations, producing more extensive human exposure, FDA aides explained.

"Although it is impossible for the FDA to remove PCBs from the environment, these regulations will assure that consumer exposure from food is kept to a minimum," Sherwin Gardner, acting FDA commissioner, stated.

The requirements will ban industrial use of PCBs in plants that process or make food, feed or food-packaging materials. The substances are generally used as a heat-transfer agent in electrical equipment. They are manufactured in the U.S. by Monsanto Co.

The FDA made some changes from its original proposal in March 1972 in the temporary PCB tolerances, or maximum amounts permitted in various foods, feeds and packaging materials.

The following tolerances were reduced because the higher limits were shown to produce undesirable residues; to 0.2 parts per million from 0.5 ppm for finished animal feed for food-producing animals; to two ppm from five ppm for animal feed components.

The tolerance for PCBs in infant and junior foods was increased to 0.2 ppm from 0.1 ppm because test techniques didn't prove sensitive enough for detection at the lower levels. The tolerance for food packaging material intended for foods for other persons was increased to 10 ppm from 5 ppm because test data showed there wasn't a significant increase in the amount of migration of the chemical from the packaging to the food at the higher tolerance. Tolerances that remain unchanged from the original proposal in 1972 are 2.5 ppm in milk on a fat basis; 2.5 ppm in manufactured dairy products on fat basis; five ppm in poultry on a fat basis; 0.5 ppm in eggs and five ppm in the edible portion of fish and shellfish.

A final change in the proposal allows an exemption from the tolerance for food packaging material if the food was separated from the packaging material by a barrier that keeps the chemical from entering the food.

The regulations take effect in 60 days.

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