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All Food Contamination Not Seen, Felt, Smelled

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Contamination of the food you eat is not always something you can see, touch and smell. Sometimes the food includes dangerous chemicals which can only be detected by laboratory analysis.

However, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts tests for microbiological dangers only when it has been alerted to a specific outbreak of a disease or misuse of a chemical.

An example occurred last year when thousands of chickens became contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyils (PCBs). The chemical has been used for years in manufacturing, mainly as a heat exchanger in closed cooling systems.

It was Holly Farms at Wilkesboro, one of the plants the USDA inspects, that caught the contamination, not the USDA. Holly farms identified the source of the PCBs as a chicken feed.

The contamination was further traced to an ingredient of the feed, fish meal processed at a plant at Wilmington.

An attorney for a consumer protection group under the direction of Ralph Nader told a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee last year that this was only one in a string of examples in which the USDA fails to protect the consumer from hidden contaminants.

The attorney, Pete Schuck, of the Center for Study of Responsive Law, testified before a subcommittee on Public Health and Environment of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee.

Schuck said it was bad enough for the USDA to be told by a company it regulated that the agency wasn't doing its job. But then, Schuck said, the USDA checked only 50 chickens before assuring the public it would not get any poultry contaminated by PCBs.

The USDA gave this assurance, Schuck said, knowing that Holly Farms already had destroyed 77,000 chickens contaminated by PCBs.

The seriousness of the contamination was indicated, Schuck said, by the fact that PCBs contamination in rice hulls caused stillbirths, miscarriages, skin disease and liver damage to nearly 10,000 people in western Japan in 1968.

And in April, 1971, a report to the President on toxic substances by the Council on Environmental Quality, Schuck said, showed only one part per million of PCBs had been found to be fatal to juvenile pink shrimp after a 48-hour exposure.

Schuck said the Food and Drug Administration established during the search for poultry contaminated by PCB that the presence of five parts per million was safe.

"The handling of this incident by UDSDA and FDA," Schuck told the congressmen, "suggests significant gaps in the protection of food consumers from the onslaught of chemical contaminants."

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