FDA proposes lower PCB levels in foods

The Food & Drug Administration is taking steps to reduce the amount of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) allowed in certain food, including milk, poultry, and fish.

According to the agency, recent studies indicate that PCB's fed in high doses to test animals cause liver tumors. The substances also have been associated with increased skin and pancreatic cancers among R&D and refinery workers exposed to PCB mixtures for five or six years. Human ingestion of extremely high levels of the substances, about 35 mg per day, can result in acnelike skin eruptions, darkening of skin and nails, excessive discharge from the eyes, and swelling of the eyelids.

PCB's have been of concern since the early 1970's when they were found to persist and accumulate in the environment. Legal limits for PCB's were first formally established by FDA in 1973. Since that time most of the major uses of PCB's, such as in carbonless copy paper, fire-resistant hydraulic fluids, plasticizers, and paints, have been phased out. The remaining major use of PCB in electrical equipment will be phased out by July 1977, and Monsanto, the only U.S. producer of PCB's, plans to withdraw completely from the market later this year.

Under FDA's proposal, the legal limit or tolerance level for PCB's would be lowered from 2.5 ppm to 1.5 ppm in the fat of milk and dairy products; from 5 ppm to 3 ppm in the fat of poultry; from 0.5 ppm to 0.3 ppm in eggs; and from 5 ppm to 2 ppm in fish and shellfish.

FDA explains that it is not proposing a ban on the products because the Delaney clause, which prohibits the addition to food of any substance that causes cancer in man or test animals, does not apply to substances such as PCB's, which are not intentionally added to food, but enter food because of their presence in the environment. Interested persons have until June 1 to comment on the proposed tolerance levels. □