Mothers' Milk in 10 States Found To Contain Toxic Chemical PCB

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Polychlorinated biphenyls, poisonous industrial chemicals that have fouled the nation's waterways, have been discovered in mothers' milk in 10 states in what a federal official yesterday called "worrisome" amounts.

The description came from Dr. David Hall, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, who chaired a special meeting at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare called to discuss what he called "this potentially serious problem."

PCBs form a class of colorless and tasteless compounds with a thousand industrial uses as insulators, sealers, heat transfer fluids and ingredients of inks, paints, lubricants and plastics.

The first findings in a national survey by the Environmental Protection Agency showed measurable amounts of PCBs in 45 of 50 samples of mothers' milk tested in Maryland, Virginia, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

The findings were called "preliminary" and "unconfirmed" by George Wirth, chief of the agency's chemicals branch in EPA's Office of Toxic Substances.

But another official who asked to remain anonymous said "the figures come from a laboratory in which I have a great deal of confidence."

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PCBs Discovered In 48 Mothers' Milk

PCB, From A1

He added that "other figures we're getting from the Midwest show the same levels or higher. Before long we should have the picture for the whole country."

Bell, who heads HEW's main environmental laboratories, said after the meeting, "I don't think I'd tell nursing mothers to make any changes in their breast-feeding now. But we're going to have to get more EPA and independent data . . . so we can have a better idea what to advise."

He added, "I don't think pregnant or nursing mothers should eat any fish from the Great Lakes or Hudson River," waters where commercial but not sports fishing has been halted because of PCB contamination.

Dr. Arthur Sellkoff, a noted environmental chemist at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, said he was "loathe to have any children exposed—this is an unpleasant piece of news we didn't expect."

Sellkoff was one of a group of consultants who met with the HEW committee and heard reports of serious disease, brain and nervous disorders, stunted growth and deaths in the nursing infants of rhesus monkeys fed PCBs. Some of the monkey mothers' milk fat contained around 3 parts per million of PCBs.

This is "in the same ballpark" as the measurements in the human mothers' milk, said Dr. J.R. Allen of the University of Wisconsin, who conducted the monkey studies.

The average measurement in the 48 mothers' milk fat was 2.1 ppm. The highest single measurement—officials did not say in what state—was 10 ppm, a figure so high it made some wonder if it would be accurate except in a case of serious industrial poisoning.

The four highest averages were in women from North Carolina, with 2.8 ppm; Maryland, 2.5; New Jersey, 2.3, and Michigan, 2.1.

The Food and Drug Administration has set a "provisional tolerance level" of 2.5 ppm for PCBs in the fatty part of whole milk on grocers' shelves. Anything higher is considered unsafe.

With new knowledge of PCB effects, "we're considering lowering those tolerances," John R. Weisel of the FDA reported.

"Numbers like these may sound very low to the average person," Bell store this stuff in its fat tissue, so if it takes it in every day, you have a buildup. And it stays in the body for years."

FDA officials said other studies show that recent PCB levels in cows' milk and infant formulas have been showing sharp drops in the past two years, which they said was encouraging in case some breast-feeding should be curtailed.

Still, health officials might have to compare the levels in mothers' milk and cows' milk state by state, because state figures vary, Weisel said.

If the EPA figures are confirmed and found widespread, committee members and consultants said, a simple way might be developed to test a mother's milk for contaminants or reports might be made to mothers on alternative foods low in risky chemicals.

Since 1968, when PCBs were first found to have crept into the environment, they have been found in drinking water, fish, other foods, wildfowl and other birds, human body fat and breast milk in several other countries—though only in scattered instances in U.S. mothers' milk.

In the early 1970s chickens and eggs contaminated by industrial PCBs were destroyed by the millions. Monsanto Co., this country's only producer of PCBs, halted sales in 1971 except for sealed machinery such as electrical transformers.

However, millions of pounds of imported PCBs have continued to pour into the country, in part because of congressional failure over the past several years to agree on a toxic substances control act. Such a bill, with a clause that could bar such imports, is before a Senate-House conference committee. On Monday night the House passed an amendment to it that would outlaw all PCB manufacture within two years.

Some 750 million pounds in use and 400 million pounds in landfills, water, soil and the air are expected to remain a problem for generations, however.

PCBs are chemically related but are different compounds from a group of fire retardants known as PBBs—polybrominated biphenyls. In the last few years PBBs have contaminated tons of Michigan livestock feed, and last week Michigan health officers reported finding PBBs in amounts as high as .6 ppm in the milk fat of 22 Michigan

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