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Federal Survey Tested Women in 10 States

PCBs in Mothers' Milk 'Worrisome'

By VICTOR COHN
Washington Post Service

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

The description came from Dr. David Rall, 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."

The first findings in a national survey by the Environmental Protection Agency showed measurable PCBs in 48 samples of 50 tested in Maryland, Virginia, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

The findings were called "preliminary" and "unconfirmed yet"



MEDICINE

by George Wirth, chief of the special 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." 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."

Rall, 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 comercial but not sport fishing has been halted because of PCB contamination.

A GROUP OF consultants 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 three parts per million of PCBs.

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

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.

PCBs in chemical language are polychlorinated biphenyls, a class of colorless and tasteless compounds with a thousand industrial uses such as insulators, sealers, heat transfer fluids and ingredients of inks, paints, lubricants and plastics.

IN THE EARLY 1970s chickens and eggs contaminated by industrial PCBs were destroyed by the millions. Monsanto Co., this country's only producer, halted PCB sales in 1971 except for sealed machinery like electrical transformers.

Millions of pounds of imported PCBs have continued to come into the country, however, in part because of congressional failure during the past several years to agree on a toxic substances control act.

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