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60,000 Tainted Eggs Eaten in 2 Weeks Here

About 60,000 eggs contaminated by a highly toxic industrial chemical apparently have been consumed in the Washington area in the last two weeks, the federal Food and Drug Administration says.

The FDA suspected the eggs might have been contaminated before they were shipped to the District from a North Carolina hatchery. But by the time government laboratory tests had confirmed that belief, the eggs already were at hotels, restaurants and stores.

"The presumption is that the eggs have moved into the hands of consumers," Don Berreth, an FDA spokesman said yesterday. He emphasized, however, there was little likelihood of individuals experiencing any adverse health effects if they consumed only a small number of tainted eggs.

"The short-term exposure that might be expected to occur does not indicate to us that there is a real health problem here," Berreth said. "I'd hate everybody to start worrying about the eggs they eat."

Leak in Machinery

The toxic chemical found in the eggs is four steps removed from its source — a leak in a piece of machinery which went unnoticed from mid-April through late July at the Wilmington, N.C., plant of the East Coast Terminal Co., producers of fish meal.

Before the leak was discovered and halted, polychlorinated biphenyls or PCB, a chemical similar to DDT and used as a cooling agent in the machinery, contaminated an estimated 16,000 tons of fish meal.

The tainted fish meal was mixed with other ingredients to produce chicken feed, which was sold to a number of poultry producers, including Central Carolina Farmers, Inc., of Durham, N.C.

FDA inspectors, alerted to the possible danger, seized 75,000 eggs Friday in two Norfolk, Va., warehouses. Another 375,000 are believed to have been shipped within North Carolina's borders, and state health officials there have been informed of their destinations.

On Aug. 4, three lots of about 5,000 dozen, or 60,000, eggs were loaded onto trucks at Central Carolina Farmers for shipment to the Metropolitan Poultry and Egg Co., 210 F St. SW.

FDA officials took 15 dozen eggs as samples from that shipment before it left North Carolina and sent the eggs to a regional laboratory in Atlanta, Ga., for analysis.

The eggs arrived at the Washington distributor's plant the next day, and Metropolitan Poultry and Egg — never notified that chemical contamination was suspected — promptly distributed them to its customers, including local hotels, restaurants and a small grocery chain in suburban Virginia which a company spokesman declined to identify.

On Aug. 9, after the eggs had been widely distributed, the FDA laboratory tests showed that the samples from the Washington shipment contained 0.98 to 2.18 parts per million of PCB, substantially above the FDA's tolerance level of 0.5 parts per million for PCB in eggs.

Accuses FDA

FDA inspectors from Baltimore promptly went to the Metropolitan Poultry and Egg offices, but discovered all the eggs had reached the retail market several days before and were so widely dispersed as to make seizure a virtual impossibility.

Rep. William F. Ryan, D-N.Y., accused the FDA yesterday of "willful and dangerous disregard for the public health" because of its failure to alert Washington consumers to the potential danger after the shipment had been traced to the district.

FDA officials confirmed the existence of the shipment of contaminated eggs into the Washington area only after details were released by Ryan's office and Peter Schuck, and associate of consumer advocate Ralph Nader.

Copies for:

W. B. Papageorge
Ed John
John Mason
P. S. Park
Jack Early
S. Bergen
John Eck

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