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FDA to Test Foods in Stores For Certain Contaminants

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The Food and Drug Administration will be looking for two recently pinpointed environmental cantaminants—mercury and PCBs—in a new survey of foods on grocery store shelves in about 30 cities across the country.

The "market basket study, involving 117 items, is likley to include Washington. It officially begins tomorrow in the Kansas City, Mo., area.

FDA will also be watching for possible contamination from pesticides, particularly DDT, from the toxic metallic element cadmium and from other poisons such as 245T and 24D PCBs—short for polychlorinated biphenyls— are a kind of chemical cousin of DDT and are used in manufacturing plastics and electrical transformer fluids.

In another federal study of possible food contaminants, the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife is checking ducks and woodcocks to determine if people should be warned not to eat the game birds shot during this hunting season.

Mercury, DDT Traces

Interior scientists are concerned about the discovery of mercury residue in ducks in the Midwest and of excessive DDT levels in woodcocks in the Canadian province of New Brunswick.

The FDA study is part of a continuing six-times-a-year, total diet porgram. But it has been expanded to include the possible environmental contaminants in an attempt to spot any potentially hazardous trend in the American diet.

Each "market basket" will include foods in a dozen classes: grain and cereals; meat, fish and poultry; dairy products; potatoes; leafy, legume, and root vegetables; fruits, oils, fats and shortenings; sugar and sugar products, including candy bars and syrups; and beverages, from soft drinks to tea, coffee and drinking water.

The foodstuffs are supposed to represent the two-week diet of 15 to 20-year-old American males—who are regarded as the biggest eaters in the country, FDA program analyst John Tisler, said yesterday.

The market baskets will be purchased at random from chain food stores in cities with populations ranging from under 50,000 to more than a million in each of five FDA districts — Boston, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Kansas City and Los Angeles. The Baltimore survey, which includes Washington, begins October 12.

Critics have complained that FDA testing procedures have not given accurate enough results because all the food classes are thrown together and tested in bulk rather than individually.

The critics, including staff aides of Sen. Philip Hart, D-Mich., contend this is one reason FDA failed to recognize mercury as an environmental contaminant when it was included once before in food tests in 1967.

Recent Findings

Recent tests of individual food classes in Canada show fairly high mercury residue in certain foodstuffs, with fish and dill going well above the 0.5 parts per million FDA considers a "safe" level as a working guide.

Tisler said that now individual classes will be studied when the composites show an abnormally high contaminant residue.

Another departure from old testing procedures is that all samples will be shipped to a centralized analysis center containing more sophisticated equipment at Kansas City. In the past, each of the five FDA districts was responsible for its own checks.

Interior's latest concern over mercury content in ducks began when the Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Bureau discovered residues in all 26 samples from North Dakota and from Michigan's Lake St. Clair-Detroit River area — where the national mercury crisis exploded when Canadians discovered large, hazardous doses in fish.

Season to Continue

Last week, a Canadian government agency announced its tests for mercury contamination in ducks taken from widely scattered locations in Eastern Canada, including the Lake St. Clair area, showed no high levels. The duck hunting season, it was decided, would continue as usual.

In New Brunswick, Canada, however, the hunting season for woodcock, a long-billed edible bird, was closed after the discovery of two high levels of DDT.

Interior scientists are now engaged in a study of woodcocks flying into Maine, a result of the Canadian finding and at the request of the National Audubon Society.

Earlier this week, the society wrote Secretary Walter J. Hickel and Health, Education and Welfare Seecretary Elliot L. Richardson recommending a ban on hunting woodcock along the Atlantic flyway," the hunting area along the Atlantic Coast, including Maryland's Eastern Shore, and inland to Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

The Audubon Society said recent tests showed the birds contained DDT residue averaging 65 parts per million, and that one went up to 773 parts per million. Both the Canadian and U.S. governments permit only 7 parts per million in the fat of hogs, cattle and sheep.

Interior is taking a hard look at birds because, ironically, it last month increased the hunting season "as a result of improved breeding conditions."

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