Toxin PBB Found in Milk Of 22 Michigan Mothers

MILK, From A1

to show what a safe level is." At the same time he added, on the basis of the incomplete information, "I could not recommend to others whether they continue or discontinue breast-feeding."

Dr. Thomas Corbett of the University of Michigan and Ann Arbor Veterans' Hospital, strongly opposed continued breast-feeding in Michigan for the present, since PBB may turn out to be a carcinogen, or cause of cancer. He has made what he calls preliminary studies that indicate that PBB causes cancer and birth defects in mice.

"It seems to me unwise to risk the welfare of a whole generation of babies in the state of Michigan," he said.

Michigan and federal Food and Drug Administration officials have set .3 parts per million as the tolerance level for the chemical in milk, meat and dairy products and .05 parts per million in eggs. Michigan has banned sales above those levels.

State officials say little meat or milk from Michigan is shipped elsewhere, though one egg hatchery — because its affected hens had stopped laying — sold 63,000 hens to a canned-soup processor.

Affected farms were quarantined this year and health tests were made of farm families who complained of illness. Health officials told mothers on these farms not to breast-feed, and other statewide tests began.

Based on some early test results, Reizen said yesterday that 22 of 26 randomly selected mothers tested throughout the state — including some in Detroit and other cities — showed PBB levels in their milk ranging from "traces" (defined as .029 parts per million or less) to ".03 parts per million or more," with "some up around .09 parts."

The .09 level is slightly less than one-third of the tolerance level set for milk on grocers' shelves.

Reizen said there is no evidence to show that the PBB in mother's milk harms babies, and that the babies of all 26 women tested seem healthy and strong.

But Corbett argued that a baby may consume only mother's milk, and "to me the wise approach would be to discontinue breast-feeding at least until the scientific studies are done rather than to continue till they're done."

He also said that milk of six of the mothers showed evidence of PCB, polychlorinated biphenyl, another industrial chemical that has caused cancer in animals and contaminated fish in many states. But he said he would not elaborate on these levels until federal officials completed a nationwide survey of PBB and PCB contamination.

Corbett was a consultant to a PBB scientific advisory panel that unsuccessfully urged Michigan to drastically lower its PBB tolerance to 5 parts per billion for eggs and meat and 1 part per billion for grocer's milk.

State officials said they could not measure such low levels reliably, and a bill taking a midway position is before the Michigan legislature.

Boris Oshcroff, environmental officer on the staff of the assistant secretary of health education and welfare for health, said yesterday that "most of the information we have so far" on PBB and health is "unconfirmed and vague, and to take any action yet would be irresponsible."

Toxin Found In Milk of 22 Mothers

By Victor Cohn
Washington Post Staff Writer

A poisonous chemical that forced Michigan farmers to slaughter more than 32,000 contaminated cows has been found in the milk of 22 Michigan mothers.

Dr. Maurice Reizen, the state's health director, said yesterday in Lansing in disclosing the results of a random sampling of 26 nursing mothers that "the problem may include a majority of new mothers" in the state.

He added that there is not enough evidence to tell Michigan nursing mothers to stop breast-feeding. A test of more mothers will start next week to get more accurate statewide information.

The toxin in question is polybrominated biphenyl (PBB), a fire-resisting chemical that accidentally got into Michigan livestock feed in 1973 and 1974. Illness or contamination since has caused the destruction of 6,000 pigs, 1,370 sheep and 1.5 million chickens in addition to the cows.

Dr. Henry Anderson of the environmental sciences laboratory of Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York — who was in Michigan last month to help start a broad survey of the health results of PBB contamination—said, "If it were my kid I wouldn't feed it that milk."

Though the PBB levels in the 22 mothers' milk were measured only in tenths of parts per million, according to another Michigan health official, Anderson said "there is very little evidence

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