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Poison Found in Foods Tied to Recycled Paper

BY STUART AUERBACH
Exclusive to The Times from the Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration has found a potentially dangerous industrial chemical in seven different types of dried foods, including baby's cereal.

The chemical, PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl), leaked into the foods from their cardboard containers, which were made from recycled paper. The PCB was contained in carbonless carbon paper that was recycled to make the boxes, the FDA reported.

FDA officials made the discovery that PCB was in packaged foods in June, but failed to make any public announcement of it. Rep. William F. Ryan (D-N.Y.), who has introduced a bill to ban PCB, revealed the FDA's discovery on Monday.

He attacked the FDA for not warning the public that the potential poison was in packaged foods and said the FDA "seems more concerned about the image of American industry rather than the public knowledge of its food supply."

PCB, a colorless and odorless liquid that is thicker than molasses, has been used extensively for 40 years as a thickener. It is also used for copying, in printing ink and as a heat conductor.

But for all its widespread use, scientists know little about PCB's potential dangers. It is known to have caused liver damage in fish and chickens, and in 1968 five Japanese died and 1,000 suffered severe skin rashes after they consumed part of a batch of cooking oil contaminated by a large amount of PCB.

The FDA has not set any toxic level for PCB but said it would act on a case-by-case basis. It has decided that five-tenths parts per million are unacceptable in eggs and five parts per million are unacceptable in chickens.

The levels of PCB found in the seven dried food products — shredded wheat, corn meal, spaghetti dinner, grits, mixed baby cereal, noodle dinner and pancake mix—ranged from one-tenth parts per million to 2.1 parts per million.

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PCB was found first in a routine FDA check in a combination sample of dried cereals. It was later traced to the shredded wheat in the sample, and then found in the other dried, packaged foods.

In all cases, said John T. Walden, an FDA spokesman, the PCB came from recycled paper. Since June, PCB has not been used in carbonless carbon paper or printing ink — the likeliest sources in the recycled paper.

Walden said the FDA made no announcement of its finding because the problem was eliminated. "The problem was dealt with," he said. "We just don't see it as a crisis."

Nevertheless, the FDA is checking 15 other foods that are packaged in recycled paper that may contain PCB to see if it's a general problem.

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