

AUG 28 1976

PCB Warning Issued

Dangerous Chemicals In Mothers' Milk

By VICTOR COHEN
Special To The Globe-Times
And The Washington Post

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 Reil, 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" 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."

Reil, 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 commercial but not sport fishing has been halted because of PCB contamination.

Dr. Arthur Selikoff, a noted environmental chemist of Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, said he was "loath to have any children exposed — this is an unpleasant piece of news we didn't expect."

Selikoff was one of a group of consultants who 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 3 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.

The average measurement in the 48 mothers' milk fat was 2.1 parts per million. The highest single measurement — officials did not say in what state — was 10 parts, a figure so high it made some wonder if it could possibly be accurate except in a case of serious industrial poisoning.

The four highest averages were in women from North Carolina with 2.6 parts per million; Maryland, 2.5; New Jersey, 2.3 and Michigan, 2.1.

The Food and Drug Administration has set a "provisional tolerance level" of 2.5 parts per million for PCBs in the fatty part of whole milk on grocery shelves. Anything higher than this level is considered unsafe.

With new knowledge of PCB effects, "we're considering lowering these tolerances," John R. Wesel of the FDA reported.

"Numbers like these may sound very low to the average

person," Selikoff said. "But the child is going to store this stuff in its fat tissue, so if it takes it in every day you have a buildup. And it stays in the body for years."

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 for what chemists call their "lovely versatility" as insulators, sealers, heat transfer fluids and ingredients of inks, paints, lubricants and plastics.

Since 1968, when they were first found to have crept into the environment, they have been discovered in drinking water, fish, other foods, wildfowl and other birds, human body fat and breast milk in several countries — though in American mothers' milk in only scattered instances.

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. Such an act, would with a clause that could bar such imports, is now before a Senate-House conference committee. Monday night the House passed an amendment that would outlaw all PCB manufacture within two years.