Spills pose no immediate health threat

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A memorandum issued by the state Department of Human Resources concerning the health threat of PCBs said the chemicals pose no immediate danger to residents along the contaminated roadsides, but warned against walking in spill areas.

Chemicals other than PCBs in the oily substance spilled along roadways may cause minor, temporary irritation of the eyes and throat and some nausea if smelled immediately after the spill, the memo said. But the effects are temporary and should disappear in a day or two

The state agency recommended that people avoid walking through spill areas, but said walking through the areas occasionally, with or without shoes, is probably not dangerous.

If a person notices an oily substance on his feet or shoes after walking through a spill area, it should be washed off with soap and water, the memo said. Contaminated clothing should not be worn again until it has been washed thoroughly.

The Division of Health Services is conducting a study of PCB levels in selected persons who have had the greatest exposure to the spills. Results from that study are expected late this week.

Residue from the PCB spills is not likely to contaminate well water because the chemicals are tightly bound to the soil where they are deposited, the memo said. But the department is checking well water for PCBs where wells are located within a few feet of the spills. Results so far have been negative, the report said.

Livestock and pets should be kept out of spill areas because some of the grass by the roadways is contaminated with PCBs. But the chemicals would not be likely to contaminate pastures or garden unless runoff at the time of the spill caused heavy erosion or did not allow the PCBs to soak into the ground.

If such runoff did occur, animals should not be allowed to graze in the areas and vegetables from these areas should not be eaten, the memo said.

In some cases where humans have been poisoned by PCBs, the chemicals were taken into the body either by swallowing a large amount or by getting a large amount on the skin over a period of time, as in factory workers using PCBs to manufacture electrical equipment, the memo said.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been used until recently as insulating agents in electrical equipment and for other industrial uses since the early 1930s.

The chemicals do not tend to break down easily over time, and fish, wildlife, domestic animals and many humans carry very small amounts of PCBs in their bodies.

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