Study: Eating PCB-tainted Great Lakes fish may cause cancer

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EAST LANSING — The high cancer rate among Michigan families whose farms are contaminated with toxic PCBs should serve as a warning to persons who eat large amounts of PCB-tainted Great Lakes fish, a state researcher said Tuesday.

Harold E.B. Humphrey of the state Department of Public Health said tests indicate that persons eating one or more meals per week of Lake Michigan sport fish show even higher blood levels of PCBs than farm families whose silos are contaminated with the chemical. Surveys of these farm families have shown higher-than-normal rates of cancer.

The sport fishermen surveyed have not reported high rates of cancer or other health problems, Humphrey said. But persons eating large amounts of contaminated fish over long periods of time might eventually suffer more health ailments — possibly even cancer, he said.

"We're not saying, 'Don't touch these fish,'" Humphrey said. "But we are saying you should reduce your exposure."

Health risks of PCBs to the general population — which does not eat large amounts of fish — are probably much less or even nonexistent, he said.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are not a proven cause of cancer in humans — but "there is mounting evidence that PCBs are carcinogens," he said.

The Health Department study, outlined at a Michigan State University symposium on PCBs, dealt with sport fishermen who consume their catch. PCBs in sport fish are a major concern to the Health Department, which has no way to "force" sportsmen to eat fewer contaminated fish.

The department supports tougher limits on the amount of PCBs allowed in fish for sale in grocery stores and restaurants.

Humphrey said sportsmen's exposure to PCBs may be substantially different from the Michigan farm families whose silos are contaminated with the chemical. In some cases, farmers may have been exposed to PCBs on a day-by-day basis for perhaps 25 years, he said. Most fisherman do not get that day-by-day exposure, he pointed out.

But the farm families' experience "is indicative of what could happen to fish eaters over time," he said.

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