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Avoiding 'The Unavoidable Contaminant'

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What do Hudson River shad, mothers' milk, fluorescent lights, breakfast-cereal boxes, rubber tires, and Thanksgiving turkeys have in common? They all contain PCBs, the ubiquitous industrial chemical that Federal officials have called "the unavoidable contaminant."

Your body probably contains some PCBs too. And because these chemicals enter the human diet indirectly and easily and may cause cancer, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has ordered food processors to cut in half the permissible PCB limits in such products as milk and cheese, poultry, eggs, fish, and shellfish.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a class of toxic, highly stable, nonflammable chemicals manufactured since 1929 for use in printing inks, adhesives, cardboard food packages, rubber tires, fluorescent light fixtures, electric transformers, paints, and television sets. Their persistence in the human food chain was first demonstrated in 1966.

"They're a tough, almost indestructible molecule," says a spokesman for the Monsanto Co., the only domestic producer of PCBs, "which is why they're so useful in heat and electricity transfers." Monsanto plans to phase out its PCB manufacturing by Oct. 31.

The reason that PCBs are so difficult to control in foods is that they're not put there intentionally. If they were a direct food additive they could be banned under the Delaney clause, a provision in Federal law that prohibits any substance in food that may cause cancer. Instead, they reach our food indirectly—through sealants in silos that contaminate poultry feed; through seepage from landfills that contaminate lakes and streams and eventually fish and shellfish; and through food-packaging materials, such as recycled cardboard, into cereals and snacks.

Limits for PCBs in food were first set by the FDA in 1973 and the new limits, says one Federal spokeswoman, are "as low as we can reliably determine for enforcement purposes." The new FDA proposal cuts the levels in the fat in dairy products to 1.5 parts per million (ppm) from 2.5 ppm; to 5 ppm in the fat in poultry from 5 ppm; to 0.5 ppm in eggs from 0.5 ppm; and to 2 ppm in fish and shellfish from 5 ppm.

"Our purpose," said an FDA spokesman, "is to establish the lowest safe level feasible. There has been a significant reduction in the exposure of the public to PCBs over the past few years. The only problem that remains is in fresh-water fish, which constitute a small part of the American diet."

But even the new, lower limits aren't low enough for some environmental groups. Joseph Highland, head of the Environmental Defense Fund's toxic-chemicals program, called the new limits "disappointing and inadequate" because he prefers an outright ban on all detectable levels of PCBs in food.

Manufacturers now using PCBs plan to switch to other products when Monsanto's supplies run out. Electrical transformers will be made with silicone compounds. And capacitors, which receive and store electricity, will be made with compounds known as phthalate esters. "Electric products may be a little more flammable without the PCBs," one industry spokesman says, "but at least they won't be contributing to the cancer scare."