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Chemical toxins in mothers' milk

Preliminary findings by the Environmental Protection Agency indicate undesirably high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a group of industrial compounds, in mothers' milk. From what will ultimately be a nationwide study, the EPA has discovered this chemical contamination in samples obtained from 10 states along the eastern seaboard. Since 1966, PCBs, used as plasticizers, electrical insulators and a wide variety of other uses, have been discovered in foodstuffs, rivers, wildfowl, and the human body.

A special meeting was held recently at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to discuss what the meeting's chairman calls "this potentially serious problem." Among the states so far studied, the highest average levels of contamination are found in North Carolina, Maryland and New Jersey with 2.6, 2.5 and 2.3 parts per million of PCBs, respectively. Studies with rhesus monkeys found high mortality and disease including that of the brain and nervous system in offspring nursed by their mothers with milk that often contained 3 ppm PCBs.

Although the sole manufacturer of PCBs, the Monsanto Co., sharply curtailed its sales in 1971, millions of pounds of imported PCBs enter the United States each year. A bill on toxic substances that could halt any such future imports is pending before Congress.

The viciousness of PCB contamination derives from its chemical stability. From the environment, the body's fat tissue absorbs and accumulates the PCBs, which will remain there for years. The Food and Drug Administration has tentatively prescribed that the PCB contamination of whole milk not exceed 2.5 ppm. Officials are awaiting the confirmation and extension of current results before considering any other remedial action. □

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