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She'll take her chances

"What exactly are PCBs?" my husband asked when he learned the Federal government is so worried about them they're taking drastic measures to reduce the allowable content in fish.

I couldn't tell him. I've heard about PCBs off and on for the past 10 years but was about to describe a PCB I was stamped.

The initials, of course, stand for polychlorinated biphenyls which are environmental pollutants as being a clear, clear liquid resembling mineral oil formed by linking chlorine atoms to biphenyls.

Biphenyls, I discovered, are a petroleum byproduct similar to benzene. However, as most people who possess seventh grade science know, is a clear, flameless liquid derived from petroleum and used to manufacture DDT.

PCB combines both chemicals. Moreover, extracted from crude oil, are blended with chlorine, which can be converted into a household bleach or poison gas, depending on the quality of the manufacturing.

Both PCB and DDT are man-made and when they were added to nature, were judged dangerous to a cat's health late in the past decade. DDT, that great insect killer of the '40s was banned in 1972 but PCB, used in industry since 1928, wasn't outlawed until 1977.

PCBs, in addition to being considered persistent, have the added disadvantage of being in body fat, presumably making them more dangerous to overweight individuals than those on the skinny side. Despite added to EPA, a law that banned the most dangerous PCBs, PCBs have been successfully used by industry. The chemical's inherent oil composition, that new technological discovery proved to be highly fire resistant (able to withstand temperatures up to 350 degrees Fahrenheit) and resistant to solvent decomposition.

That's why they're so hard to get rid of. Once PCBs get into the air, water and land, they fill our environment to be a particularly noxious group. So noxious that contamination has become global, contaminating over all seven continents into the remote corners of the poles.

Most of the 40 million pounds of PCB produced each year went into high power electrical transformers but this versatile fluid has also been widely used in the manufacture of television sets, roofing and insulation, paints, plastics, carbonless copy paper, printing inks, adhesives, etc.

The first hint that all was not well with the world of PCB was in 1968 when a Swedish chemist named Sven Jonasson began studying a foreign substance found in dead fish and birds. Jonasson, who at first believed the substance was DDT because of the chemical similarity, later identified it as PCB.

Japan, the first country to outlaw PCB, did so in 1968 when approximately 14,000 of its citizens revolutionized contaminated rice oil with unpleasant aftereffects. Ten reportedly died and 1,500 suffered loss of hair, nose and a variety of ailments including miscarriages.

Kumamoto Chemical Company, located near St. Louis, Mo., manufactured almost all PCB products in this country but was restricted from doing so in 1977. An early in 1977, Minnesota voluntarily can back sales of PCB products to those which were contained, such as in transformers.

Even so, the substance kept pouring up and was especially prevalent in Lake Michigan and the Upper Mississippi

river. Tests showed fatty fish like salmon and trout contained up to 10 parts per million of PCB. Sport fishermen were advised to limit their consumption to one meal per week, pregnant women were advised to avoid them altogether and commercial fishermen were forbidden to harvest them.

In 1978, four years before Minnesota closed production, the U. S. Food and Drug Administration imposed a 5 parts per million limit on PCB in food. This limit was recently tightened to 2 ppm., a move that is bound to have a severe effect on the fishing industry.

The exact extent won't be known for quite a while but its strong likelihood of allowing lakes like PCB to be let loose in our environment for the past 50 years the government chose instead to limit the number we can eat.

Because PCBs are also in the air and ground it seems probable that before long meat, poultry, produce, fruit and other foods will either be retained or destroyed off limits to consumers.

We can always fall back on bread and water, of course, but grains come from toxic infused fields and water from our polluted lakes and rivers. Some experts, in fact, believe our drinking water is the most contaminated substance of all.

As for me, I'll take my chances with whatever comes. The only time I ever felt sick was when I couldn't have a second helping.

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