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PCB: An Old Enemy Uncovered

Polychlorinated biphenyls. Watch for them on your supermarket shelves, and in farm fields, car agencies, hardware stores . . .

The shopper who failed, or didn't take high school chemistry had better turn over the shopping chores to a friend who made the grade, and can smell chemical trouble when it's there.

The trouble is, not many people smelled polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) trouble, although it has been around for years. Now its the latest thing to worry about.

PCBs, chemists tell us, are complex mixtures of chlorine substituted biphenyl compounds. Inert, nonflammable, resistant to acids, alkalis and other caustic chemicals, they have low volatility and are stable under prolonged heat. They make excellent additives in products in which their qualities are desirable.

As coolant - insulation fluids in transformers, included in ballasts for fluorescent fixtures, impregnated in cotton and asbestos for braided insulation of electrical wiring, as wire and cable coating, in capacitors, they are to be found just about everywhere.

In high - pressure hydraulic fluids, gasket sealers, heat transfer agents, machine tool cutting oils, and in expoxy paints, protective contings for wood, metal and concrete. In adhesives and in carbonless reproducing paper. PCBs are important ingredients.

Manufactured by the Monsanto Company, under the brand name 'Aroclor', PCB is a colorless, odorless liquid, thicker than molasses.

PCB has caused malformations and liver damage in fish and birds, we are told, and may be harmful to humans in massive concentrations.

Three years ago, five Japanese died and 1,000 were afflicted by an extreme form of acne when large amounts of PCB contaminated a batch of cooking oil.

Small amounts may not be harmful to humans, but of course, the thing to do is avoid the stuff.

Three weeks ago, 50,000 turkeys on a Minnesota farm were found to be contaminated, and thousands of coho salmon in Michigan are said to be tainted.

The Michigan Department of Public Health advises that fish reported containing more than 5 ppm of PCBs may be harmful to health, and recommends that not more than one meal of such fish per week be eaten.

Coho being caught in Michigan have been found to contain more than 5 ppm of PCBs.

PCBs have been found in some cereal and noodles packaged in recycled paperboard in which the chemicals were used.

What cumulative effect the chemical has on humans is unknown, and research is under way.

As matters stand, however, there isn't much for the shopper-consumer to do but avoid the few products known to contain dangerous amounts of PCBs.

Even if use of the chemical is halted, and clean substitutes are found, PCBs will be around for a long time contaminating the environment and our food.

Britain banned PCB after finding it in birds that feed on fresh-water fish. British scientists are said to have found high levels of the chemical in the feathers of birds that died 30 years ago.

Because it is an ingredient in paints and plastics used in the manufacture of cars, tractors and machinery, it will be washing into the earth and into waterways for years, and will continue to be picked up by microorganisms at the bottom of the food chain and to be concentrated in ever larger forms of life.

The wonder is that we live as long as we do, when just about every package we pick up or product we use may be contaminated, doing us harm when we use it, or long after, striking immediately or building up lethal concentrations for future attacks.

We didn't need another enemy, but there he is — PCB — remember the name.

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