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today's chuckle
Retirement is that marvelous time when the sun rises and you don't.

Study Indicates High PCB Level Ups Cancer Risk

Findings may fuel controversy

By DOLLY KATZ
Free Press Medical Writer

LANSING — Preliminary evidence from a state health department study suggests that people whose blood contains high levels of PCBs — industrial chemicals now found in trace amounts in virtually everybody's blood — may have an increased risk of cancer.

The study, to be released today at a symposium on PCBs, is likely to increase the controversy over permissible levels of PCBs in Lake Michigan fish sold for human consumption.

The Department of Public Health wants the maximum level lowered from the current five parts per million to two parts per million. Commercial fishing interests and the state departments of Agriculture and Natural Resources support the current level.

THE HEALTH department study, which began around 1978, is one of the first to report results of a search for possible damage from relatively small quantities of PCBs.

Financed largely by the federal National Cancer Institute, the study focused on 60 Michigan farm families whose animals are food stored in PCB-contaminated silos. PCB blood

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High PCB level raises risk of cancer, study indicates

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levels in these family members were about five times higher than the state average.

The group, which included 368 people, has reported eight newly diagnosed cases of cancer since 1985. Three eight cases represent a cancer rate eight the national average.

THE 69 families were part of a larger study of 1,000 Michigan fish-eating whose PCB levels are about the same as those of most state residents. This large group does not have higher rates of cancer. But members of the group do report somewhat higher rates of arthritis and other joint pain and symptoms — such as numbness and tingling in the fingers — that suggest subtle nerve damage.

"At this point, all we can say is there are interesting trends," said Harold Humphrey, an environmental epidemiologist who directed the study. He stressed that the studies do not prove that PCBs cause cancer or other diseases.

PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — are flame-resistant liquids introduced in U.S. industry in 1930 and quickly adopted in hundreds of uses. They replaced mineral oils in electric transformers and were incorporated into items as diverse as carbonless copy paper and the linings of silos.

During the last 50 years, as a result of slow, constant leaks from factories and machines, they have leaked into the world's oceans and air. They are carried in the bodies of all living things, from polar bears above the Arctic Circle to nursing mothers and their babies in Michigan.

ALTHOUGH Congress banned the manufacture of PCBs in 1976, about 700 million pounds are still in use in the United States, ranging already into the environment. PCBs are virtually indestructible, and, once inside a person's body, they stay there for decades. Evidence of possible damage to adults and unborn children have come from studies of animals and from a disastrous accident in Japan in which 5,000 people ate rice oil contaminated with 2,000 times the average PCB level in Americans. Many of those Japanese suffered afterward from respiratory, vision and other health problems.

But until recently, no study had been organized to determine whether the small amounts of PCBs in the body — from barely detectable levels up to one part per million or more — are harmful. Though nobody expects such small amounts to cause major disease outbreaks, they are concerned about more subtle effects: a modest increase in the cancer rate, perhaps, or subtle learning disorders in children exposed in the uterus and by drinking their mothers' milk.

THE 69 farm families included in the study were chosen because their sites, built in the 1930s, were coated with PCBs and the families were thus likely to have higher-than-average levels of PCBs in their blood.

Fish from the Great Lakes are the major source of PCBs for residents of Michigan and surrounding states, although recent studies show that the levels of PCBs in these fish are declining. State and federal regulations prohibit the sale of fish contaminated with more than five parts per million of the chemical, and the state health department suggests that pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children not eat Great Lakes fish, except for perch.

A proposed federal Food and Drug Administration regulation that would lower the permissible limit for fish intended commerce to 2 parts per million is being challenged by fishing interests in Congress. Like commercial interests in the Michigan area who opposed the lower standard, the fishermen maintain that the lower limit would have no effect on the people who eat the most fish — sportsmen and Indians — and would have a devastating effect on the fishing industry.

Agee says press had it wrong

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"However, the time has come when I can no longer maintain silence when confronted with continued attacks on our honesty and personal reputations."

The two have frequently been seen together in public since Cunningham left Ford.

She resigned in October 1988, three weeks after Agee announced her promotion to vice-president at age 29 and told a meeting of 600 Ford employees that their personal relationship was not the reason for her rapid rise through the ranks.

AGEE SAID Monday that Cunningham's competence was never questioned and that her promotion at Ford was based on excellent performances. "She made an extraordinary contribution to the Ford Corp., and her rapid promotions were entirely justified."

Cunningham, now vice-president in charge of strategic planning and product development at Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, "has pursued her distinguished career in the private sector with the honesty, drive and outstanding level of success that characterized her performance at Ford," Agee said.

Two days after BCA made its personal attack on Agee, which was reported in the Times and elsewhere, it issued a more conciliatory statement when Ford said it had no intention of buying more BCA stock immediately.

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