What are PCBs and what do they do?

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are a chlorinated hydrocarbon that is very stable and has been used extensively in industry.

During the past four or five years Monsanto Chemical Co., St. Louis, has voluntarily removed them from use in every application except "closed" non-polluting uses. But the levels of PCBs in Lake Michigan fish have continued to rise.

And the PCBs endnager health, according to Dr. James Allen, University of Wisconsin medical school professor of pathology.

"The fish in the Great Lakes that contains 5 parts per million (PCBs) if consumed on a continuous basis by man would be toxic."

But man does not drink water, and eat all his food, with a level of 5 parts per million PCBs. So the impact on humans is unknown.

Allen does know the impact on monkeys.

Monkeys, at the University of Wisconsin, fed levels from 2.5 parts per million to 300 parts per million in all food develop acne, loss of hair, loss of eyelashes, decided edema of the face and develop higher levels of PCBs. When fed 25 to 300 parts per million over a two to three month period the monkeys experience morbidity and mortality.

PCB levels can affect reproduction.

Monkeys fed only food containing from 2.5 to 5 parts per million for one to two months did not die but experienced breeding difficulties.

Allen said it is not impossible that a woman, with a build-up of PCBs high enough, might not be able to conceive or might abort the fetus.

And PCBs do not break down but in animals like man build up in fatty tissues reaching ever higher levels.

"Man stores . . . PCBs . . . there is a distinct possibility that given time the PCBs could reach a toxic level."

People in Japan, accidentally affected, have suffered the symptoms for years. Children born of affected mothers were small and discolored.

The United States Food and Drug Administration can control interstate shipment of contaminated fish but not sale of the fish within the state, according to Allen. "As far as I know there are no restrictions on the sale of fish. In fact I don't know if it is checked at all, if it goes into local markets."

The PCBs are, like DDT, a chlorinated hydrocarbon. Allen said the PCBs are more severe.

"I think it's more serious than DDT."

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