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Chemical Also In Cows' Milk

Experts Advise Moms To Continue Nursing

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The average amount of a poisonous chemical found in the milk of seven N.C. mothers is less than the amount sometimes found in cow's milk, a U.S. Public Health Service officer said this week, and pediatricians say there is no reason for mothers to stop nursing.

"Besides," said Boris Osheroff, principal environmental officer with the Public Health Service, "nothing can be done as an antidote . . . and I don't think people should be unnecessarily alarmed. We have no assurance this is safe, but on the other hand, no indication it is unsafe."

The poisonous chemical, known as PCB, was found in the milk of mothers in 10 states, including the Carolinas. The study was made public Friday. (The story was published in the late editions of Saturday's Charlotte Observer.)

The study showed that the highest concentration among the samples of mothers' milk was found in North Carolina.

The situation was described last week as a "potentially serious problem" by Dr. David Rall, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Rall was chairman of a special meeting at the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare to discuss the matter. Wednesday, Rall's office in the Research Triangle Park (in the area between Durham, Chapel Hill and Raleigh) referred questions about PCB findings to Osheroff.

The findings were from a very small sampling. Only 48 of 1,000 samples have been put through what scientists call "an extremely complicated and sophisticated analysis."

The findings average 2.1 parts PCB per million.

The remaining 952 analyses likely will take several months, according to Dr. Elden Savage, director of the Epidemiologic Pesticide Study Center at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where half the tests are being made. Work has not begun on the other half, Savage said.

Osheroff said the health service has no recommendations to nursing mothers. "We are looking at other sources of infant food," he said, "whole milk and prepared infant formula. And if we do make a recommendation to change, we'll be sure it will be of positive benefit."

Osheroff said he talked to pediatricians around the country Monday and "they all said they would advise mothers to continue breast feeding. But they also recommended that a mother not go on a crash diet, because that would burn up the fat and release the PCBs quicker."

Dr. S.H. Sandifer, head of the

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preventive medicine section of the Medical University of South Carolina in Charlston said he, too, would not advise mothers to stop breast feeding.

"I'd keep on," he said. "They (PCBs) are in everything. It's hard to find a place that doesn't have it. And it's in such small amounts it's not bothering anybody.

"Nobody's even suggested there's any effect on infants or adults from these small amounts," Sandifer said.

Sandifer does not recommend that mothers have their milk analyzed for PCB content. The USC Medical School does not undertake such analyses for individuals, he said, and he does not know of a laboratory in the Carolinas that does. (Dr. Savage said Colorado State University will not perform a PCB analysis for an individual either.)

The sole producer of PCB (which stands for polychlorinated biphenyls) in the United States is Monsanto Industrial Chemical Co. of St. Louis.

The chemical has been made since 1929, said Dan Bishop, a Monsanto spokesman, "but in 1970 we instituted a restrictive sales program limiting sales of it to the electrical industry where it is contained in closed systems."

Bishop said Monsanto plans to stop manufacturing PCB as soon as a suitable substitute can be developed — by the end of next year at the latest.

He said PCB, a chemical in liquid form, is used only in transformers and capacitors. At one time it was used widely in the manufacture of paints, printing inks, carbonless paper, hydraulic fluids and as a heat transfer agent, he said.

Bishop said "there are no documented cases of PCB causing fatalities," but cases of acne, skin sores and loss of hair have been attributed to the chemical in persons heavily subjected to it.

But Jim Sibbison, a spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, quoted EPA Administrator Russell Train as having said, "PCBs are a significant hazard to human health," and that "tests have shown they cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders, skin lesions and tumors in mammals. Their destructive effects on fish and wildlife are well-documented."

Sibbison said Train reported that 1.4 billion pounds of PCBs have been produced in the United States and that more than half of that has entered the environment.

"There appears to be relatively little we can do to remove PCBs from the environment," he quoted Train as saying.

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