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Toxin found in milk of most women in test

By Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, MICH.—A private laboratory has found the toxic chemical PBB in the breast milk of about 90 per cent of 140 women it tested and it said nine women showed PBB levels higher than allowed in commercial milk.

Tests for the related industrial chemical PCB in the breast milk of about half of those women showed all had high levels, ranging from 700 parts per billion to 5,000 parts per billion. Those levels exceed the federal limit for PCB in baby food and, in some cases, milk.

BOTH CHEMICALS are potentially harmful to humans. Laboratory tests have indicated PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) may cause cancer and birth defects, and some scientists say PBB (polybrominated biphenyl) may cause similar problems.

No human health problems have been directly linked with PBB, part of a fire retardant which was accidentally mixed with Michigan livestock feed in 1973. The contamination was not discovered until about a year later after many cattle became ill.

The 140 women tested in the last seven weeks by the Environmental Research Group in Ann Arbor showed PBB levels in their milk fat as high as 700 parts per billion, according to research group president Dr. Richard Copeland.

THE AVERAGE LEVEL among the women with positive tests was 160 parts per billion PBB, he said. Nine samples exceeded the Food and Drug Administration limit of 300 parts per billion PBB in milk, he said.

The women tested by the research group had paid to take the tests after they read about a preliminary state study on PBB. They were not considered to be a scientifically selected sample. The earlier study, released in August, indicated a majority of Michigan mothers may have PBB-tainted breast milk.

It showed 22 of 30 Michigan women tested had detectable levels of PBB in their milk fat. The highest amount detected was 800 parts per billion and the average was 80 parts per billion.

State health officials did not recommend mothers stop breast-feeding, saying the sample was too small to be scientifically valid.

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