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Study of PCBs called misleading

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WASHINGTON — A panel of federal and private health specialists has been accused of being misleading in concluding that mothers can continue to breast-feed their babies despite contamination of their milk by a toxic industrial chemical called PCBs.

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare Committee to Coordinate Toxicology on PCBs in mothers' milk "failed to adequately deal with the issue" at a meeting here Sept. 23, according to a joint statement Saturday by Dr. Joseph Highland of the Environmental Defense Fund and Stephanie Harris of the Health Research Group.

PCBs, which concentrate in fatty tissue and remain there for years, first came into wide use in the 1930s, mainly in electrical equipment. Not until the mid-1960s did researchers discover that PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — had contaminated the air, water and soil of all industrialized countries. Last week, Monsanto Chemical Co., the only American manufacturer, said it was ending production.

HEW convened the committee after the Environmental Protection Agency reported finding PCBs in 79 of 80 samples of milk fat from mothers in 11 states.

The average concentration was 1.8 parts per million. In baby rhesus monkeys nursed by their mothers with milk contaminated by as little as 4 to 6 ppm, skin discoloration and other adverse effects occurred. The babies improved when weaned, but behavioral and learning deficiencies lasted for at least a year.

Because of this finding, made by University of Wisconsin pathologist James R. Allen, the HEW committee urged immediate studies to determine, among other things, whether the harm possibly caused by PCBs to breast-fed babies includes learning disabilities or hyperactivity.

The non-profit organization representatives also made these points:

- The committee's conclusions were those of the chairman alone, did not have support from committee members and consequently should not be ranked as official government recommendations.
- Although several federal officials on the committee advised women who are or might someday be pregnant not to eat sport fish identified as PCB carriers, the committee ignored a Fish and Wildlife Service official in the audience whose data indicated the widespread incidence of PCBs in all fresh water fish.

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