Researchers study effect of PCBs on new babies

By JAMES KATES
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LANSING — Within a few months, a team of University of Michigan researchers hopes to unveil its findings on whether mothers who eat large amounts of PCB-contaminated fish may be jeopardizing the development of their children.

The U-M study, conducted with the cooperation of hospitals in Grand Rapids and Muskegon, is examining more than 300 infants born to mothers who consume large amounts of Lake Michigan fish. Fish from the lake are tainted with varying amounts of PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls.

Researchers are looking at birth weight and other physical factors, said Greta Fein, a U-M psychologist who is coordinating the study. They also are studying behavior patterns and reflexes among the infants, she said.

Preliminary evidence from the study tends to reinforce what most researchers have long suspected — that mothers who eat large amounts of PCB-tainted fish pass the chemical on to their offspring, either through the womb before birth or through breast-feeding, she said.

Findings on the chemical's effect on newborn and six-month-old infants should be made public by this summer, she said.

The study is needed because fetuses and infants may be "particularly vulnerable" to PCB exposure, she said.

State health officials already have warned that children, pregnant women and women who are nursing or expecting to bear children should avoid eating most Great Lakes sport fish.

The U-M study was initiated by handing out questionnaires to more than 8,000 mothers shortly after they gave birth, Ms. Fein said.

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