ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY

POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS

Division of Toxicology ToxFAQs™ February 2001

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about polychlorinated biphenyls. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It's important you understand this information because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

HIGHLIGHTS: Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are a mixture of individual chemicals which are no longer produced in the United States, but are still found in the environment. Health effects that have been associated with exposure to PCBs include acne-like skin conditions in adults and neurobehavioral and immunological changes in children. PCBs are known to cause cancer in animals. PCBs have been found in at least 500 of the 1,598 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What are polychlorinated biphenyls?

Polychlorinated biphenyls are mixtures of up to 209 individual chlorinated compounds (known as congeners). There are no known natural sources of PCBs. PCBs are either oily liquids or solids that are colorless to light yellow. Some PCBs can exist as a vapor in air. PCBs have no known smell or taste. Many commercial PCB mixtures are known in the U.S. by the trade name Aroclor.

PCBs have been used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors, and other electrical equipment because they don't burn easily and are good insulators. The manufacture of PCBs was stopped in the U.S. in 1977 because of evidence they build up in the environment and can cause harmful health effects. Products made before 1977 that may contain PCBs include old fluorescent lighting fixtures and electrical devices containing PCB capacitors, and old microscope and hydraulic oils.

What happens to PCBs when they enter the environment?

❑ PCBs entered the air, water, and soil during their manufacture, use, and disposal; from accidental spills and leaks during their transport; and from leaks or fires in products containing PCBs.

❑ PCBs can still be released to the environment from hazardous waste sites; illegal or improper disposal of industrial wastes and consumer products; leaks from old electrical transformers containing PCBs; and burning of some wastes in incinerators.

❑ PCBs do not readily break down in the environment and thus may remain there for very long periods of time. PCBs can travel long distances in the air and be deposited in areas far away from where they were released. In water, a small amount of PCBs may remain dissolved, but most stick to organic particles and bottom sediments. PCBs also bind strongly to soil.

❑ PCBs are taken up by small organisms and fish in water. They are also taken up by other animals that eat these aquatic animals as food. PCBs accumulate in fish and marine mammals, reaching levels that may be many thousands of times higher than in water.

How might I be exposed to PCBs?

❑ Using old fluorescent lighting fixtures and electrical devices and appliances, such as television sets and refrigerators, that were made 30 or more years ago. These items may leak small amounts of PCBs into the air when they get hot during operation, and could be a source of skin exposure.

❑ Eating contaminated food. The main dietary sources of PCBs are fish (especially sportfish caught in contaminated lakes or rivers), meat, and dairy products.

❑ Breathing air near hazardous waste sites and drinking contaminated well water.

❑ In the workplace during repair and maintenance of PCB transformers; accidents, fires or spills involving transformers, fluorescent lights, and other old electrical devices; and disposal of PCB materials.

How can PCBs affect my health?

The most commonly observed health effects in people exposed to large amounts of PCBs are skin conditions such as acne and rashes. Studies in exposed workers have shown changes in blood and urine that may indicate liver damage. PCB exposures in the general population are not likely to result in skin and liver effects. Most of the studies of health effects of PCBs in the general population examined children of mothers who were exposed to PCBs.

Animals that ate food containing large amounts of PCBs for short periods of time had mild liver damage and some died. Animals that ate smaller amounts of PCBs in food over several weeks or months developed various kinds of health effects, including anemia; acne-like skin conditions; and liver, stomach, and thyroid gland injuries. Other effects

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of PCBs in animals include changes in the immune system, behavioral alterations, and impaired reproduction. PCBs are not known to cause birth defects.

How likely are PCBs to cause cancer?

Few studies of workers indicate that PCBs were associated with certain kinds of cancer in humans, such as cancer of the liver and biliary tract. Rats that ate food containing high levels of PCBs for two years developed liver cancer. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has concluded that PCBs may reasonably be anticipated to be carcinogens. The EPA and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) have determined that PCBs are probably carcinogenic to humans.

How can PCBs affect children?

Women who were exposed to relatively high levels of PCBs in the workplace or ate large amounts of fish contaminated with PCBs had babies that weighed slightly less than babies from women who did not have these exposures. Babies born to women who ate PCB-contaminated fish also showed abnormal responses in tests of infant behavior. Some of these behaviors, such as problems with motor skills and a decrease in short-term memory, lasted for several years. Other studies suggest that the immune system was affected in children born to and nursed by mothers exposed to increased levels of PCBs. There are no reports of structural birth defects caused by exposure to PCBs or of health effects of PCBs in older children. The most likely way infants will be exposed to PCBs is from breast milk. Transplacental transfers of PCBs were also reported In most cases, the benefits of breast-feeding outweigh any risks from exposure to PCBs in mother's milk.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to PCBs?

❑ You and your children may be exposed to PCBs by eating fish or wildlife caught from contaminated locations. Certain states, Native American tribes, and U.S. territories have issued advisories to warn people about PCB-contaminated fish and fish-eating wildlife. You can reduce your family's exposure to PCBs by obeying these advisories.

❑ Children should be told not play with old appliances, electrical equipment, or transformers, since they may contain PCBs.

❑ Children should be discouraged from playing in the dirt near hazardous waste sites and in areas where there was a transformer fire. Children should also be discouraged from eating dirt and putting dirty hands, toys or other objects in their mouths, and should wash hands frequently.

❑ If you are exposed to PCBs in the workplace it is possible to carry them home on your clothes, body, or tools. If this is the case, you should shower and change clothing before leaving work, and your work clothes should be kept separate from other clothes and laundered separately.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to PCBs?

Tests exist to measure levels of PCBs in your blood, body fat, and breast milk, but these are not routinely conducted. Most people normally have low levels of PCBs in their body because nearly everyone has been environmentally exposed to PCBs. The tests can show if your PCB levels are elevated, which would indicate past exposure to above-normal levels of PCBs, but cannot determine when or how long you were exposed or whether you will develop health effects.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has set a limit of 0.0005 milligrams of PCBs per liter of drinking water (0.0005 mg/L). Discharges, spills or accidental releases of 1 pound or more of PCBs into the environment must be reported to the EPA. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires that infant foods, eggs, milk and other dairy products, fish and shellfish, poultry and red meat contain no more than 0.2-3 parts of PCBs per million parts (0.2-3 ppm) of food. Many states have established fish and wildlife consumption advisories for PCBs.

Source of Information

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2000. Toxicological profile for polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information? For more information, contact the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Division of Toxicology, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop E-29, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, FAX: 404-639-6359. ToxFAQs™ Internet address is http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html . ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.