



# PUBLIC HEALTH STATEMENT

## POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBS)

Division of Toxicology

November 2000

This Public Health Statement is the summary chapter from the Toxicological Profile for Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs). It is one in a series of Public Health Statements about hazardous substances and their health effects. A shorter version, the ToxFAQs™, is also available. This information is important 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. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737.

This public health statement tells you about polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and the effects of exposure.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identifies the most serious hazardous waste sites in the nation. These sites make up the National Priorities List (NPL) and are the sites targeted for long-term federal cleanup activities. PCBs have been found in at least 500 of the 1,598 current or former NPL sites. However, the total number of NPL sites evaluated for PCBs is not known. As more sites are evaluated, the sites at which PCBs are found may increase. This information is important because exposure to PCBs may harm you and because these sites may be sources of exposure.

When a substance is released from a large area, such as an industrial plant, or from a container, such as a drum or bottle, it enters the environment. This release does not always lead to exposure. You are exposed to a substance only when you come in contact with it. You may be exposed by breathing,

eating, or drinking the substance, or by skin contact. If you are exposed to PCBs, many factors determine whether you'll be harmed. These factors include the dose (how much), the duration (how long), and how you come in contact with them. You must also consider the other chemicals you're exposed to and your age, sex, diet, family traits, lifestyle, and state of health.

### 1.1 WHAT ARE POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs)?

PCBs are a group of synthetic organic chemicals that can cause a number of different harmful effects. There are no known natural sources of PCBs in the environment. PCBs are either oily liquids or solids and are colorless to light yellow. Some PCBs are volatile and may exist as a vapor in air. They have no known smell or taste. PCBs enter the environment as mixtures containing a variety of individual chlorinated biphenyl components, known as congeners, as well as impurities. Because the health effects of environmental mixtures of PCBs are difficult to evaluate, most of the information in this toxicological profile is about seven types of PCB mixtures that were commercially produced. These seven kinds of PCB mixtures include 35% of all the PCBs commercially produced and 98% of PCBs sold in the United States since 1970. Some commercial PCB mixtures are known in the United States by their industrial trade name, Aroclor. For example, the name Aroclor 1254 means that the mixture contains approximately 54% chlorine by weight, as indicated by the second two digits in the name. Because they don't burn easily and are good insulating materials, PCBs were used widely as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors, and other electrical equipment. The manufacture of

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PCBs stopped in the United States in August 1977 because there was evidence that PCBs build up in the environment and may cause harmful effects. Consumer products that may contain PCBs include old fluorescent lighting fixtures, electrical devices or appliances containing PCB capacitors made before PCB use was stopped, old microscope oil, and old hydraulic oil.

### 1.2 WHAT HAPPENS TO POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs) WHEN THEY ENTER THE ENVIRONMENT?

Before 1977, PCBs entered the air, water, and soil during their manufacture and use in the United States. Wastes that contained PCBs were generated at that time, and these wastes were often placed in landfills. PCBs also entered the environment from accidental spills and leaks during the transport of the chemicals, or from leaks or fires in transformers, capacitors, or other products containing PCBs. Today, PCBs can still be released into the environment from poorly maintained hazardous waste sites that contain PCBs; illegal or improper dumping of PCB wastes, such as old transformer fluids; leaks or releases from electrical transformers containing PCBs; and disposal of PCB-containing consumer products into municipal or other landfills not designed to handle hazardous waste. PCBs may be released into the environment by the burning of some wastes in municipal and industrial incinerators.

Once in the environment, PCBs do not readily break down and therefore may remain for very long periods of time. They can easily cycle between air,

water, and soil. For example, PCBs can enter the air by evaporation from both soil and water. In air, PCBs can be carried long distances and have been found in snow and sea water in areas far away from where they were released into the environment, such as in the arctic. As a consequence, PCBs are found all over the world. In general, the lighter the type of PCBs, the further they may be transported from the source of contamination. PCBs are present as solid particles or as a vapor in the atmosphere. They will eventually return to land and water by settling as dust or in rain and snow. In water, PCBs may be transported by currents, attach to bottom sediment or particles in the water, and evaporate into air. Heavy kinds of PCBs are more likely to settle into sediments while lighter PCBs are more likely to evaporate to air. Sediments that contain PCBs can also release the PCBs into the surrounding water. PCBs stick strongly to soil and will not usually be carried deep into the soil with rainwater. They do not readily break down in soil and may stay in the soil for months or years; generally, the more chlorine atoms that the PCBs contain, the more slowly they break down. Evaporation appears to be an important way by which the lighter PCBs leave soil. As a gas, PCBs can accumulate in the leaves and above-ground parts of plants and food crops.

PCBs are taken up into the bodies of small organisms and fish in water. They are also taken up by other animals that eat these aquatic animals as food. PCBs especially accumulate in fish and marine mammals (such as seals and whales) reaching levels that may be many thousands of times higher than in water. PCB levels are highest in animals high up in the food chain.

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### 1.3 HOW MIGHT I BE EXPOSED TO POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs)?

Although PCBs are no longer made in the United States, people can still be exposed to them. Many older transformers and capacitors may still contain PCBs, and this equipment can be used for 30 years or more. Old fluorescent lighting fixtures and old electrical devices and appliances, such as television sets and refrigerators, therefore may contain PCBs if they were made before PCB use was stopped. When these electric devices get hot during operation, small amounts of PCBs may get into the air and raise the level of PCBs in indoor air. Because devices that contain PCBs can leak with age, they could also be a source of skin exposure to PCBs.

Small amounts of PCBs can be found in almost all outdoor and indoor air, soil, sediments, surface water, and animals. However, PCB levels have generally decreased since PCB production stopped in 1977. People are exposed to PCBs primarily from contaminated food and breathing contaminated air. The major dietary sources of PCBs are fish (especially sportfish that were caught in contaminated lakes or rivers), meat, and dairy products. Between 1978 and 1991, the estimated daily intake of PCBs in adults from dietary sources declined from about 1.9 nanograms (a nanogram is a billionth part of a gram) to less than 0.7 nanograms. PCB levels in sportfish are still high enough so that eating PCB-contaminated fish may be an important source of exposure for some people. Recent studies on fish indicate maximum

concentrations of PCBs are a few parts of PCBs in a million parts (ppm) of fish, with higher levels found in bottom-feeders such as carp. Meat and dairy products are other important sources of PCBs in food, with PCB levels in meat and dairy products usually ranging from less than 1 part in a billion parts (ppb) of food to a few ppb. Concentrations of PCBs in subsurface soil at a Superfund site have been as high as 750 ppm. People who live near hazardous waste sites may be exposed to PCBs by consuming PCB-contaminated sportfish and game animals, by breathing PCBs in air, or by drinking PCB-contaminated well water. Adults and children may come into contact with PCBs when swimming in contaminated water and by accidentally swallowing water during swimming. However, both of these exposures are far less serious than exposures from ingesting PCB-contaminated food (particularly sportfish and wildlife) or from breathing PCB-contaminated air.

Workplace exposure to PCBs can occur during repair and maintenance of PCB transformers; accidents, fires, or spills involving PCB transformers and older computers and instruments; and disposal of PCB materials. In addition to older electrical instruments and fluorescent lights that contain PCB-filled capacitors, caulking materials, elastic sealants, and heat insulation have also been known to contain PCBs. Contact with PCBs at hazardous waste sites can happen when workers breathe air and touch soil containing PCBs. Exposure in the contaminated workplace occurs mostly by breathing air containing PCBs and by touching substances that contain PCBs.

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### 1.4 HOW CAN POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs) ENTER AND LEAVE MY BODY?

If you breathe air that contains PCBs, they can enter your body through your lungs and pass into the bloodstream. We do not know how fast or how much of the PCBs that are breathed will pass into the blood. A common way for PCBs to enter your body is by eating meat or fish products or other foods that contain PCBs. Exposure from drinking water is less than from food. It is also possible that PCBs can enter your body by breathing indoor air or by skin contact in buildings that have the kinds of old electrical devices that contain and can leak PCBs. For people living near waste sites or processing or storage facilities, and for people who work with or around PCBs, the most likely ways that PCBs will enter their bodies are from skin contact with contaminated soil and from breathing PCB vapors. Once PCBs are in your body, some may be changed by your body into other related chemicals called metabolites. Some metabolites of PCBs may have the potential to be as harmful as some unchanged PCBs. Some of the metabolites may leave your body in the feces in a few days, but others may remain in your body fat for months. Unchanged PCBs may also remain in your body and be stored for years mainly in the fat and liver, but smaller amounts can be found in other organs as well. PCBs collect in milk fat and can enter the bodies of infants through breast-feeding.

### 1.5 HOW CAN POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs) AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Many studies have looked at how PCBs can affect human health. Some of these studies investigated

people exposed in the workplace, and others have examined members of the general population. Skin conditions, such as acne and rashes, may occur in people exposed to high levels of PCBs. These effects on the skin are well documented, but are not likely to result from exposures in the general population. Most of the human studies have many shortcomings, which make it difficult for scientists to establish a clear association between PCB exposure levels and health effects. Some studies in workers suggest that exposure to PCBs may also cause irritation of the nose and lungs, gastrointestinal discomfort, changes in the blood and liver, and depression and fatigue. Workplace concentrations of PCBs, such as those in areas where PCB transformers are repaired and maintained, are higher than levels in other places, such as air in buildings that have electrical devices containing PCBs or in outdoor air, including air at hazardous waste sites. Most of the studies of health effects of PCBs in the general population examined children of mothers who were exposed to PCBs. The possible health effects of PCBs in children are discussed in Section 1.6.

To protect the public from the harmful effects of toxic chemicals and to find ways to treat people who have been harmed, scientists use many tests.

One way to see if a chemical will hurt people is to learn how the chemical is absorbed, used, and released by the body; for some chemicals, animal testing may be necessary. Animal testing may also be used to identify health effects such as cancer or birth defects. Without laboratory animals, scientists would lose a basic method to get information needed to make wise decisions to protect public health. Scientists have the responsibility to treat

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research animals with care and compassion. Laws today protect the welfare of research animals, and scientists must comply with strict animal care guidelines.

Rats that ate food containing large amounts of PCBs for short periods of time had mild liver damage, and some died. Rats, mice, or monkeys 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 caused by PCBs in animals include reductions in the immune system function, behavioral alterations, and impaired reproduction. Some PCBs can mimic or block the action of hormones from the thyroid and other endocrine glands. Because hormones influence the normal functioning of many organs, some of the effects of PCBs may result from endocrine changes. PCBs are not known to cause birth defects. Only a small amount of information exists on health effects in animals exposed to PCBs by skin contact or breathing. This information indicates that liver, kidney, and skin damage occurred in rabbits following repeated skin exposures, and that a single exposure to a large amount of PCBs on the skin caused death in rabbits and mice. Breathing PCBs over several months also caused liver and kidney damage in rats and other animals, but the levels necessary to produce these effects were very high.

Studies of workers provide evidence that PCBs were associated with certain types of cancer in humans, such as cancer of the liver and biliary tract. Rats that ate commercial PCB mixtures throughout their lives developed liver cancer. Based on the evidence for cancer in animals, the Department of

Health and Human Services (DHHS) has stated that PCBs may reasonably be anticipated to be carcinogens. Both EPA and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) have determined that PCBs are probably carcinogenic to humans.

### 1.6 HOW CAN POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs) AFFECT CHILDREN?

This section discusses potential health effects from exposures during the period from conception to maturity at 18 years of age in humans.

Children are exposed to PCBs in the same way as are adults: by eating contaminated food, breathing indoor air in buildings that have electrical devices containing PCBs, and drinking contaminated water. Because of their smaller weight, children's intake of PCBs per kilogram of body weight may be greater than that of adults. In addition, a child's diet often differs from that of adults. A Food and Drug Administration (FDA) study in 1991 estimated dietary intakes of PCBs for infants (6 months) and toddlers (2 years) of less than 0.001 and 0.002  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{day}$ . Children who live near hazardous waste sites may accidentally eat some PCBs through hand-to-mouth behavior, such as by putting dirty hands or other soil/dirt covered objects in their mouths, or eating without washing their hands. Some children also eat dirt on purpose; this behavior is called pica. Children could also be exposed by playing with old appliances or electrical devices that contain PCBs.

It is possible that children could be exposed to PCBs following transport of the chemical on clothing from the parent's workplace to the home.

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House dust in homes of workers exposed to PCBs contained higher than average levels of PCBs. PCBs have also been found on the clothing of firefighters following transformer fires. The most likely way infants will be exposed is from breast milk that contains PCBs. Fetuses in the womb are also exposed from the exposed mother.

In one study of women exposed to relatively high concentrations of PCBs in the workplace during pregnancy, their babies weighed slightly less at birth than babies born to women exposed to lower concentrations of PCBs. Studies of women who consumed high amounts of fish contaminated with PCBs and other chemicals also had babies that weighed less than babies from women who did not eat fish. Similar observations have been made in some studies of women with no known high exposure to PCBs, but not all studies have confirmed these findings. Babies born to women who ate fish contaminated with PCBs before and during pregnancy showed abnormal responses to tests of infant behavior. Some of these behaviors, such as problems with motor skills and a decrease in short-term memory, persisted for several years. However, in these studies, the women may have been exposed to other chemicals. Other studies suggest that the immune system may be affected in children born to and nursed by mothers exposed to increased levels of PCBs. There are no reports of structural birth defects in humans caused by exposure to PCBs or of health effects of PCBs in older children. It is not known whether PCB exposure can cause skin acne and rashes in children as occurs in some adults, although it is likely that the same effects would occur at very high PCB exposure levels.

Animal studies have shown harmful effects in the behavior of very young animals when their mothers were exposed to PCBs and they were exposed in the womb or by nursing. In addition, some animal studies suggest that exposure to PCBs causes an increased incidence of prenatal death and changes in the immune system, thyroid, and reproductive organs. Studies in monkeys showed that young animals developed skin effects from nursing after their mothers were exposed to PCBs. Some studies indicate that very high doses of PCBs may cause structural birth defects in animals.

Children can be exposed to PCBs both prenatally and from breast milk. PCBs are stored in the mother's body and can be released during pregnancy, cross the placenta, and enter fetal tissues. Because PCBs dissolve readily in fat, they can accumulate in breast milk fat and be transferred to babies and young children. PCBs have been measured in umbilical cord blood and in breast milk. Some studies have estimated that an infant who is breast fed for 6 months may accumulate in this period 6–12% of the total PCBs that will accumulate during its lifetime. However, in most cases, the benefits of breast-feeding outweigh any risks from exposure to PCBs in mother's milk. You should consult your health care provider if you have any concerns about PCBs and breast feeding. Because the brain, nervous system, immune system, thyroid, and reproductive organs are still developing in the fetus and child, the effects of PCBs on these target systems may be more profound after exposure during the prenatal and neonatal periods, making fetuses and children more susceptible to PCBs than adults.

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## 1.7 HOW CAN FAMILIES REDUCE THEIR RISK OF EXPOSURE TO POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs)?

If your doctor finds that you have been exposed to significant amounts of polychlorinated biphenyls, ask whether your children might also be exposed. Your doctor might need to ask your state health department to investigate.

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 fish and wildlife advisories to warn people about PCB-contaminated fish and fish-eating wildlife. These advisories will tell you what types and sizes of fish and game animals are of concern. An advisory may completely ban eating fish or game or tell you to limit your meals of a certain fish or game type. For example, an advisory may tell you not to eat a certain type of fish or game more than once a month. The advisory may tell you only to eat certain parts of the fish or game and how to prepare or cook the fish or game to decrease your exposure to PCBs. The fish or wildlife advisory may have special restrictions to protect pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children. To reduce your children's exposure to PCBs, obey these advisories. Additional information on fish and wildlife advisories for PCBs, including states that have advisories, is provided in Chapter 6 (Section 6.7) and Chapter 8 of the toxicological profile. You can consult your local and state health departments or state natural resources department on how to obtain PCB advisories, as well as other important information, such as types of fish and wildlife and the locations that the advisories apply to.

Children should be told that they should not play with old appliances, electrical equipment, or transformers, since they may contain PCBs. Children who live near hazardous waste sites should be discouraged from playing in the dirt near these sites and should not play in areas where there was a transformer fire. In addition, children should be discouraged from eating dirt, and careful handwashing practices should be followed.

As mentioned in Section 1.3 of the profile, workplace exposure to PCBs can still occur during repair and maintenance of old PCB transformers; accidents, fires, or spills involving these transformers or other PCB-containing items; and disposal of PCB materials. If you are exposed to PCBs in the workplace, it may be possible to carry them home from work. Your occupational health and safety officer at work can tell you whether the chemicals you work with may contain PCBs and are likely to be carried 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.

## 1.8 IS THERE A MEDICAL TEST TO DETERMINE WHETHER I HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs)?

Levels of PCBs in the environment were zero before PCBs were manufactured. Now, all people in industrial countries have some PCBs in their bodies. There are tests to determine whether PCBs are in the blood, body fat, and breast milk. These are not regular or routine clinical tests, such as the one for

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cholesterol, but could be ordered by a doctor to detect PCBs in people exposed to them in the environment and at work. If your PCB levels are higher than the background levels, this will show that you have been exposed to high levels of PCBs. However, these measurements cannot determine the exact amount or type of PCBs that you have been exposed to, or how long you have been exposed. Although these tests can indicate whether you have been exposed to PCBs to a greater extent than the general population, they do not predict whether you will develop harmful health effects. Blood tests are the easiest, safest, and probably the best method for detecting recent exposures to large amounts of PCBs. Results of such tests should be reviewed and carefully interpreted by physicians with a background in environmental and occupational medicine. Nearly everyone has been exposed to PCBs because they are found throughout the environment, and people are likely to have detectable amounts of PCBs in their blood, fat, and breast milk. Recent studies have shown that PCB levels in tissues from United States population are now declining.

## **1.9 WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS HAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MADE TO PROTECT HUMAN HEALTH?**

The federal government develops regulations and recommendations to protect public health. Regulations can be enforced by law. Federal agencies that develop regulations for toxic substances include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Recommendations provide valuable guidelines to protect public health but

cannot be enforced by law. Federal organizations that develop recommendations for toxic substances include the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

Regulations and recommendations can be expressed in not-to-exceed levels in air, water, soil, or food that are usually based on levels that affect animals; then they are adjusted to help protect people. Sometimes these not-to-exceed levels differ among federal organizations because of different exposure times (an 8-hour workday or a 24-hour day), the use of different animal studies, or other factors.

Recommendations and regulations are periodically updated as more information becomes available. For the most current information, check with the federal agency or organization that provides it. Some regulations and recommendations for PCBs include the following:

The EPA standard for PCBs in drinking water is 0.5 parts of PCBs per billion parts (ppb) of water. For the protection of human health from the possible effects of drinking the water or eating the fish or shellfish from lakes and streams that are contaminated with PCBs, the EPA regulates that the level of PCBs in these waters be no greater than 0.17 parts of PCBs per trillion parts (ppt) of water. States with fish and wildlife consumption advisories for PCBs are identified in Chapter 6 (Section 6.7) and Chapter 8 of the toxicological profile.

The FDA has set residue limits for PCBs in various foods to protect from harmful health effects. FDA required limits include 0.2 parts of PCBs per million parts (ppm) in infant and junior foods, 0.3 ppm in eggs, 1.5 ppm in milk and other dairy

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products (fat basis), 2 ppm in fish and shellfish (edible portions), and 3 ppm in poultry and red meat (fat basis).

OSHA regulates that workers not be exposed by inhalation over a period of 8 hours for 5 days per week to more than 1 milligram per cubic meter of air (mg/m<sup>3</sup>) for 42% chlorine PCBs, or to 0.5 mg/m<sup>3</sup> for 54% chlorine PCBs.

NIOSH recommends that workers not breathe air containing 42 or 54% chlorine PCB levels higher than 1 microgram per cubic meter of air (µg/m<sup>3</sup>) for a 10-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

EPA requires that companies that transport, store, or dispose of PCBs follow the rules and regulations of the federal hazardous waste management program. EPA also limits the amount of PCBs put into publicly owned waste water treatment plants. To minimize exposure of people to PCBs, EPA requires that industry tell the National Response Center each time 1 pound or more of PCBs have been released to the environment.

### 1.10 WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

If you have any more questions or concerns, please contact your community or state health or environmental quality department or:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry  
Division of Toxicology  
1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32  
Atlanta, GA 30333

### Information line and technical assistance:

Phone: 888-422-8737  
FAX: (770)-488-4178

ATSDR can also tell you the location of occupational and environmental health clinics. These clinics specialize in recognizing, evaluating, and treating illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances.

### To order toxicological profiles, contact:

National Technical Information Service  
5285 Port Royal Road  
Springfield, VA 22161  
Phone: 800-553-6847 or 703-605-6000

### Reference

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.

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