

## Chapter 41

# Polychlorinated Biphenyls

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### Synonyms

*PCBs, aroclors, chlorinated biphenyls*

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are industrial compounds with multiple industrial and commercial uses (Table 41.1). PCBs are chemically inert and stable when heated. These properties contribute greatly to PCBs having become environmental contaminants. The chemical inertness and heat stability properties that make PCBs desirable for industry also protect them from destruction when the products in which they are used are discarded. These same properties also enable PCB residues to persist in the environment for long periods of time and to be transported worldwide when contaminated particulate matter travels through waters, precipitation, wind, and other physical forces.

PCBs have a physical structure similar to DDT, and, like DDT, they are classified as aromatic hydrocarbons which contain one or more benzene rings. The presence of chlorine results in DDT, PCBs, and other compounds with similar structures commonly being referred to as chlorinated hydrocarbons. The toxicity of these compounds is associated with the amount of chlorine they contain. The trade name of Aroclor® for PCBs that were produced by a manufacturer in the United States contains a numerical designation that specifies the amount of chlorine present in a particular formulation. For example, Aroclor® 1221 contains 21 percent chlorine while Aroclor® 1254 contains 54 percent chlorine. The first two digits designate the number of carbons in the formulation. The chemical structure of PCBs results in the possibility of many different forms or isomers, (more commonly called congeners) of these compounds. PCBs in other countries have different trade names than Aroclor® (Table 41.2).

### Cause

Like other chlorinated hydrocarbons, PCBs accumulate in the fat of animals or are lipophilic, and they tend to become concentrated at higher levels of the food chain. In general, persistence increases for PCBs that are made with higher amounts of chlorine. Birds are most susceptible to PCB compounds of the mid-chlorination range (42–54 percent).

### Species Affected

Mammals, especially mink, are more susceptible than birds and invertebrates to direct toxicity from PCBs. The highest tissue concentrations of these compounds are found among birds, especially marine species that are at the top of complex oceanic food webs and among fish-eating birds, such

as cormorants, that use large inland water bodies. For example a 12.9-fold increase has been reported from plankton to fish in a Lake Michigan food web. Although direct toxicity for birds is generally low (Table 41.3), PCBs are powerful inducers of liver enzyme systems that increase the metabolism of hormones. PCBs may have caused thin eggshells in double-crested cormorants and white pelicans, and under experimental conditions, in ring-doves and (perhaps) in Coturnix quail and mallard ducks. Unfortunately, there is insufficient knowledge to clearly define the impacts of PCBs on bird reproduction, especially in field situations, because tissue residues are often highly correlated with other lipophilic compounds, such as organochlorines. Findings have generally been inconclusive, but the greatest effects have been seen in gallinaceous birds such as pheasants, chickens, and doves.

### Distribution

PCBs were first identified in the tissues of wildlife in Sweden, and they are now known to occur in a wide variety of wildlife and other species, including humans, throughout the world. PCBs are clearly global contaminants, and they are the most abundant of the chlorinated hydrocarbon pollutants in the global ecosystem with the possible exception of petroleum products. Industrial wastes released into aquatic systems, point sources of contamination from manufacturing facilities, landfills receiving waste from such facilities, and combustion and other disposal of products containing PCBs are generally recognized sources of contamination. Another less well-known source of PCB contamination of the environment was the use of PCBs during the 1950s and 1960s as additives to extend the residual life and effectiveness of expensive chlorinated insecticides such as chlordane, aldrin, dieldrin, and benzene hexachloride. It is estimated that more than 1.5 metric tons of PCBs have been produced worldwide. PCB manufacturing in the United States was discontinued in 1978.

The variable environmental distribution of PCBs results from their physical and chemical properties, which influence their rates of distribution, retention, and degradation in different environments. This results in great differences in the relative concentrations of the different forms of PCBs found in wildlife samples from different geographic areas and is also a reflection of the magnitude of local and regional con-

**Table 41.1** *Uses of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in industry and products for society.*

**Properties**

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Heat stability  
Chemical stability  
Ability to be mixed with organic compounds  
Slow degradation

**Industrial uses**

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Lubricants, hydraulic fluids, grinding fluids  
Heat transfer agents, insulators  
Plasticizers  
Dielectric sealants  
Dedusting agents  
Protective coatings

**Common products that have contained PCB additives**

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Wire and cable coating  
Impregnants for braided cotton-asbestos insulation  
Printing inks and mimeograph inks  
Preparation of imitation gold leaf  
Pigment vehicle for decoration of glass and ceramics  
Essential components of coating for flameproofing cotton drill for outer garments and for rendering olive-drab canvas fire retardant, water-repellant, and rot-proof (tents, tarpaulins)  
Moistureproof coating for wood, paper, concrete, and brick  
Asphalt, roof coatings  
High quality precision casting wax; waxes used in making dental castings and costume jewelry  
Sealers for masonry, wood, fiberboard, and paper  
Window envelopes  
Polystyrene, polyethylene, neoprene, polybutene, silicone rubber, crepe rubber  
Plasticizers in paints  
Life extenders and sometimes toxicity synergists for pesticides containing DDT, dieldrin, lindane, chlordane, aldrin, and benzene

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tamination patterns, environmental transport processes, and the composition of PCB residues in the food chain.

## Seasonality

Exposure to PCBs is not seasonally dependent; except that in warm weather, PCB residues may vaporize or evaporate with liquid from contaminated areas, and thus, increase the risk of airborne exposure.

## Field Signs

Direct mortality of wild birds from exposure to PCBs rarely occurs. We are only aware of one such event having been documented. The number of different PCBs present in the environment further complicates evaluations because of different impacts and lethality associated with these different compounds. Nonspecific signs associated with acute exposure of birds to toxic levels of PCBs include lethargy, lack

of locomotive and muscle coordination or ataxia, tremors, and other observations. Behavioral modifications and impaired reproductive performance may also occur and would be more readily detected at the population rather than individual level (Table 41.4).

## Gross Lesions

There are no diagnostic lesions associated with exposure to PCBs. Enlarged liver and kidneys, atrophy of the spleen and the bursa of Fabricius, emaciation, and excess fluids around the heart have been associated with chronic exposure.

Excess fluid or edema in tissues has been found in some cases of acute PCB exposure, and this suggests that PCBs may interfere with tissue permeability or cardiac function or both. PCBs have been shown to cause physical defects in embryos, or be teratogenic, in chickens, and they also cause

**Table 41.2** Trade names for polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Trade name	Country of manufacturer	Manufacturer
Aroclor®	United States of America	Monsanto
Clophens®	Germany	Bayer
Fenclores®	Italy	Caffaro
Phenoclores®; Pyralenes®	France	Prodelec
Kanechlores®	Japan	Kanegafuchi
Others have been produced in Czechoslovakia and the former USSR		

**Table 41.3** Relative toxicity of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) for birds. [Adapted from Eisler, 1986.  $LC_{50}$  is the contaminant concentration in the diet that is required to kill 50 percent of the test animals in a given period of time; by comparison, the  $LC_{50}$  for mink to Aroclors® 1242 and 1254 is 8.6 and 6.7, respectively. mg/kg, milligrams per kilogram. >, greater than. —, no data available.]

Species	$LD_{50}$ (mg/kg of Aroclor®)			
	1221	1242	1254	1260
Bobwhite quail	>6,000	2,098	604	747
Mallard duck	—	3,182	2,699	1,975
Ring-necked pheasant	>4,000	2,078	1,091	1,260
Japanese quail	>6,000	>6,000	2,898	2,186
European starling, red-winged blackbird, brown-headed cowbird	—	—	1,500	—

**Table 41.4** Reported effects of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in birds.

Type of impact	Examples
Behavioral	Lethargy Locomotive and muscle incoordination or ataxia Tremors and convulsions Reduced nest attentiveness and protection of eggs
Reproductive	Embryo mortality resulting in decreased hatchability of eggs Decreased egg production Egg shell thinning
Pathological	Accumulation of fluid within the pericardial sac or hydropericardium Excess fluid or edema in body tissues and organs Atrophy of bursa of Fabricius, spleen, and other lymphoid tissues Enlarged livers that are firm and light colored Bill and foot deformities (from embryonic exposure)
Immunological	Increased susceptibility to infectious disease
Other	Weight loss Debilitation

a condition analogous to chick edema disease. This condition results in the leakage of body fluids into various organs and tissues. However, the presence of dioxins as contaminants within the PCB formulations may be the actual cause of these lesions.

### Diagnosis

Diagnosis of acute poisoning is based on PCB residues in tissues, and as for most other chlorinated hydrocarbons, mortality is best diagnosed from residues found in brain tissue. However, the concentrations of PCBs that indicate poisoning vary greatly with the specific formulation of PCBs, the species of bird, and, often, the presence of other environmental contaminants. Detection of subacute effects, such as poor reproductive performance and immunosuppression, is also confounded by these same factors. Comparison of residues in the tissues of birds suspected of being poisoned with residues in tissues of normal birds of the same species in nearby or regional sites can be diagnostically useful along with knowledge of PCB deposition and discharges in the area. Comparisons are sometimes difficult because of the varying effects of different PCB mixtures and the interactions that occur between PCBs, other pollutants, and other disease agents. Many toxic and biochemical responses from PCB exposure occur in multiple species and body organ systems.

Residue levels alone will generally not be sufficient data for making a diagnosis. Necropsy findings combined with laboratory analyses, including residue evaluations, knowledge of environmental conditions and events at the field site, and response of different species to PCB exposure are all needed for sound judgements to be reached.

### Control

Prevention of the entry of PCBs into the environment and containment or removal of PCB contamination that is already present are necessary to reduce exposure of wildlife. PCB sales in the United States were stopped in the 1970s, but large amounts are still present in the environment due to environmental persistence and to global transport by winds and other means from locations where PCBs are still used. Improper disposal of products that contain PCBs through landfills and incineration at temperatures that are too low (below 1,600 °C) to destroy PCBs can cause further environmental contamination. However, more stringent air-quality standards in the United States and other nations have diminished the potential that PCBs in incinerated materials will be added to the environment through combustion.

Bird use of heavily contaminated sites should be prevented to the extent feasible by habitat manipulation, physical barriers, scaring devices, and other appropriate means. Knowl-

edge of PCB levels in specific environments should be gained prior to developing those areas for wildlife, including the use of dredge material to create artificial islands for bird nesting habitat. PCB and heavy metal loads in sediments should also be considered in decisions regarding dumping dredge materials.

## Human Health Considerations

PCBs are known to accumulate in humans, and health advisories are often issued about consuming wildlife from heavily contaminated environments. Residues in wildlife can only be transferred to humans by consuming contaminated tissues. As with most chlorinated hydrocarbons, the greatest concentrations of residues are in fat tissue, and removing fatty parts of the carcass prior to cooking can significantly reduce potential human exposure. Although PCB residues cannot be transferred to humans from wildlife by means other than consumption, the cause of death is seldom known when dead wildlife are encountered and the risk of exposure to disease agents that can be transmitted by contact should not be taken. Always wear gloves or use other physical barriers to prevent personal contact with the carcass.

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## Supplementary Reading

- Eisler, R., 1986, Polychlorinated biphenyl hazards to fish, wildlife, and invertebrates: a synoptic review: Fish and Wildlife Service Biological Report 85(1.7), 72 p.
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- Rice, C.P., and O'Keefe, P., 1995, Sources, pathways, and effects of PCBs, dioxins, and dibenzofurans, *in* Hoffman, D.J., and others, eds., Handbook of ecotoxicology: Boca Raton, Fla., Lewis Publishers, p. 424–468.

