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Vital Signs

Risks: High PCB Levels, Fewer Births of Boys

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR

Women exposed to high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are significantly less likely to give birth to boys, according to a new study.

PCBs, which have been associated with various negative health effects, have been banned in the United States since 1977, but they persist in meats, eggs, dairy products and fish. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says everyone has detectable levels of the chemicals.

Researchers studied stored blood from 399 women who gave birth to single children from April 1964 to April 1967. After adjusting for age, race and other factors, they found that women in the 90th percentile for PCB blood levels were 33 percent less likely to have a boy than women in the 10th percentile.

The paper appeared online July 15 in Environmental Health.

“Most people’s levels of PCBs are considerably lower today than they were when these samples were taken,” said Irva Hertz-Picciotto, the lead author and a professor of epidemiology at the University of California, Davis. “The bigger significance of the paper is that compounds similar to PCBs are present in flame retardants used in many products today, and are increasing at a rapid rate.

“We should be concerned and looking at some of these similar chemicals,” Dr. Hertz-Picciotto added.