

E.C. children part of PCB study

EAST CHICAGO: Scientists will track 54 students and their mothers for four years

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EAST CHICAGO | Scientists with four major universities are teaming up for a comprehensive four-year study of polychlorinated biphenyls in the bodies of Twin City children -- and how they got there.

Using sophisticated air monitoring equipment and regular testing of volunteer families' blood, researchers hope to learn about concentrations of PCBs in residents, and consequences from exposure to the neurotoxic carcinogen.

"The Chicago area is a major source of PCBs," said Keri Mercer, study coordinator, "We know the (PCB) level is high, but not where it's coming from."

The study will track 54 West Side Junior High School students and their mothers for four years, and compare the data with those from a similarly sized community in eastern Iowa which has no known sources of PCBs.

"This is not a health study, it's an exposure study," said Peter Thorne, a University of Iowa environmental health scientist and principal investigator for the study. "We don't really know too much about airborne exposures."

While PCBs were banned in the United States in 1977, contamination of Lake Michigan -- affecting 18 million people -- continues through fallout of PCBs from the air, Mercer said.

Dubbed AESOP -- Airborne Exposure to Semi-volatile Organic Pollutants -- the study is sponsored by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and combines resources of the University of Iowa, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and University of Kentucky.

"This is a long-overdue opportunity to learn about PCBs in the local environment," said Betty Balanoff, chair of the project's community advisory board.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has determined that exposure to PCBs can cause cancer of the liver and biliary tract, and the chemical has been linked to problems with motor skills and a decrease in short-term memory in children.

Thorne said the research team is waiting only for final approval from his university's human subjects review board to begin enrolling residents for the study, which he hopes to

start before the end of the year.

Victoria Persky, UIC internist and community outreach leader for the project, said she will be working closely with people in East Chicago to get input from residents about chemicals in their environment, past and present.

The scientists met with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Thursday to discuss their study's overlapping with Army Corps plans to dredge the PCB-laden Indiana Harbor and Ship Canal, which could begin as early as 2009.