

Study Finds Industrial Toxin Widespread

Scientists have expressed concerns that polyfluoroalkyl compounds (PFCs) - an industrial toxin - have spread worldwide after they found high levels in people who eat whale meat in the remote Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic.

Philippe Grandjean, an environmental health expert at the Harvard School of Public Health and the University of Southern Denmark said, "This pollution is a new health concern for the Faroese and many populations worldwide."

Grandjean said, "We know very little on the toxicity in humans so far, even less in regard to whales." PFCs are used in products such as water or grease repellents for textiles, fire-fighting foams, or some papers.

The study found higher traces of PFCs in the blood of people who ate whales in the Faroes -- between Norway and Iceland -- comparable to those in people in industrial nations closer to the sources of the chemicals.

Pilot whales are a small species at the top of the marine food chain, and live near the Faroe Islands. PFCs build up in their muscles and liver because they eat smaller fish that have absorbed PFCs dumped into the seas.

According to the study, the lowest levels of the toxin were found in children and mothers who did not eat much whale meat.

Grandjean said, PFOs are just one of nine types of PFCs, "a single dinner with whale meat every two weeks is associated with an increase of 25 percent in the blood concentration."

In the past, it was reasoned increasing PFC contamination was thought to come from everyday exposure to items such as textiles or furniture.

"Now we are seeing evidence that they are widespread in the environment and building up," Grandjean said.

The study appears in the August edition of the journal Environmental Science & Technology.

A separate study also found high levels of PFOS in the liver of polar bears.

The European Food Safety Authority said in a recent report, that some PFCs have produced tumors in rats but do not seem to cause cancers in humans. One study has linked PFCs to lower human birth weights.

In 2003, 3M Co's Scotchgard eliminated its use of PFO's due to worries about the dispersal of the chemicals in the environment.

Grandjean said the study found at least two people in the Faroes who had blood levels of PFOS that exceeded the safe limit implied by the Food Safety Authority report.