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Umwelt Bundes Amt
Für Mensch und Umwelt

Dioxins in food –Blood tests not meaningful

Human Biomonitoring Commission advises against individualised testing

In light of the current situation of dioxin contamination in animal feed and some foods, concerned citizens have considered blood tests to detect the presence of dioxin. The Human Biomonitoring Commission (HBM) of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) advises against this. Although it is in principle possible to trace dioxins in the human body, the blood dioxin concentration resulting from weeks of consumption of eggs and meat will not be measurably different to background concentrations in the population, says the Human Biomonitoring Commission. Dioxins are normally traceable in blood and in the breast milk of nursing mothers.

The dioxin load in the human organism depends on a variety of factors. Humans absorb small amounts of dioxin in the course of their entire lives, and every individual has traces of them from birth onwards. Dioxins accumulate in the body, which accounts for the increase in the load with age. Its presence also depends on lifetime nutrition habits and the contamination of consumed foods.

Compared to this life-long contamination, even several weeks' consumption of contaminated eggs and meat at the excessive levels currently reported is quantitatively rather low. The Human Biomonitoring Commission believes the dioxin concentration in blood-- even under the present circumstances- will not differ significantly from current background levels. As the BfR has stated clearly, there is no danger of poisoning with the contamination levels in food reported thus far. There is therefore no medical indication for the necessity of such individualised testing of consumers, and the coverage of associated costs by third parties (e.g. health insurance funds) is unlikely. Dioxin determination in blood is not a routine analysis and is done only by specialised laboratories. The costs for a single test run at € 700-1000.

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Population's dioxin exposure on the decline

The federal states' breast milk screening programmes and trend analyses of dioxin content in blood in Germany have shown that dioxin levels have declined steadily in the past 25 years, with exposure levels now only about one third of what they were formerly. The decline in dioxin exposure is proof of the success of the statutory measures that have been implemented, but exposure levels have not dropped any further in recent years. Efforts to bring down dioxin exposure levels even more must be followed through. The position held by the HBM Commission is one of no tolerance for the increased levels of dioxin in animal feed and food, for the sake of consumer protection and food safety. All measures necessary to prevent highly contaminated products from entering the food chain must be taken, which is also the objective of the tightened limits on dioxins in food and feed set by the EU.

General background information on human biomonitoring (HBM)

HBM testing aims to trace pollutants in human body fluids and tissue (e.g. blood, urine, breast milk or fatty tissue). These tests enable determination of the population's exposure to environmental pollutants. HBM tests can alert experts to new, as of yet unregulated substances (watchdog function), as well as observe the trend in exposure over time. The tests can also be used to check whether the statutory measures taken to date have made an impact and actually served to reduce human exposure to a given pollutant.

For more information on human biomonitoring, related pollutants and the work done by the HBM Commission see: http://www.uba.de/gesundheit-e/monitor/index.htm.

Dessau-Roßlau, 27 January 2011