

Suspect chemical used in Mass. plants

By MICHAEL E. KNELL

At least one of two chemicals suspected of causing miscarriages is used in some Bay State high-tech plants, company officials said yesterday.

Responding to a study that showed dramatically increased miscarriages among IBM workers, Digital Equipment Corp. of Maynard and M/A Com Inc. of Burlington said they have already discontinued one of the two glycol ethers.

The IBM study, conducted by Johns Hopkins and released yesterday, showed miscarriages of 10 out of 30 pregnant women who worked with the two chemicals — more than twice the rate for women in other work.

Those numbers are too small to be convincing, said Tom Beerman, spokesman for the Semiconductor Industry Association, which represents 40 companies with about 200,000 employees. "I would be cautious not to read too much into this study."

The trade group is doing its own study, which will be released before year's end, he said.

That study has already been criticized as flawed by worker-health groups. What's more, the industry already has more than a decade of evidence that the glycol ethers are dangerous — especially to pregnant women, said Rand Wilson, director of the Boston-based Campaign for Responsible

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"We don't need any more studies," he said. "These have to be removed from the work place. There have to be safe substitutes."

Government oversight of work place conditions must be improved, said Nancy Lessin, director of the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health.

In the Boston area, 6,000 people work in electronics manufacturing and 4,900 are technicians in related jobs, Wilson said.

The two chemicals are diethylene glycol dimethyl ether and ethylene glycol monethyl ether acetate.

A 1980 study at Digital showed twice the

expected miscarriage rate in chip-making operations in Hudson. That plant no longer uses either chemical, said DEC spokeswoman Joyce Radnor.

While other chemicals are used, the company finds alternative jobs for chip-makers who are — or expect to become — pregnant, she said.

Digital does use one of the two glycol ethers in a Shrewsbury factory that makes "heads" for computer memory devices. M/A Com uses the same chemical in its Burlington chip-making plant, but is "aggressively pursuing" substitutes, said spokeswoman Victoria Dillon.

M/A Com has never seen any ill-effect from that chemical's use, and has not used the other chemical, she said.

The chemicals are most-often used in making semiconductor chips, where women account for more than 60 percent of the work force, Wilson said.

Other local chip-makers include Analog Devices in Norwood, the Raytheon Co. in Lexington and the Massachusetts Microelectronics Center in Westboro.

Those officials were not available for comment yesterday.

Raytheon's chip-making operations are headquartered in California.

Reports to the Environmental Protection Agency indicate 750,000 pounds of glycol ethers were used by U.S. semiconductor operations in 1990.