



Removing Trans Fats From The Equation

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of preventable death—yet only one-fourth of us keep our blood cholesterol levels under control, despite 24 million Americans reportedly taking statins to lower their cholesterol levels. One strategy is getting patients to switch nutritional behaviors, but physicians say that's not as easy as it sounds.

That's why the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene came up with a totally different approach: restricting the use of artificial trans fat—a contributor to coronary heart disease—in city food providers (restaurants, cafeterias, caterers, senior centers and street-food vendors).

The decision was significant because just a 2% increase in energy intake from trans fat can up your risk for a coronary event by 23%. The increase also negatively influences insulin sensitivity and systematic inflammation.

Per a new study, every year “6% to 19% of coronary heart disease events and 30,000 or more premature deaths are estimated to occur in the United States because of trans fat consumption.”

What's behind the research. The study, “Cholesterol Control Beyond the Clinic: New York City's Trans Fat Restriction,” was funded via grants from the City of New York and The American Heart Association, published in the July 21 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Researchers investigated actions taken by the New York City Health Department and report that “70% of trans fats in the diet are artificially produced and only present because we fail to prevent industry from using it.”

Removing them from the American diet will “improve lipid profiles of millions of persons without requiring complex behavioral efforts and may reduce the need for medication.”

So why are trans fats used in the first place? According to the American Heart Association, companies like using trans fats because they're cheap to produce, can be stored for extended periods of time and, perhaps most importantly, they can be reused multiple times in commercial fryers.

And for the most part, they've been inundating the American diet since the early 50s. Finally, in 2003, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated trans fat content be listed on packaged goods by 2006—allowing products with less than 0.5 grams to be labeled as “zero grams trans fats.”

Restaurants, where many of us get one-third of our daily caloric intake, typically didn't disclose nutritional data . . . making it virtually impossible for us to stay informed and avoid unhealthy ingredients.

Not limited to just fried foods, trans fats can be found in margarine, baked goods (pies, cookies, crackers, etc.) pizza and shortenings. They occur naturally in small amounts of meat and dairy products, yet that only constitutes 21% of total fat intake, says the study.

Deadly Opponent: Artificial Trans Fats

- Created via an industrial process, trans fats raise your bad cholesterol (LDL) levels—and reduce good cholesterol (HDL) levels.
- It's a fact. The more artificial trans fats you consume, the more likely you are of developing heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes.
- Americans consume about 2% of their calories from trans fats, which is twice the amount the American Heart Association suggests.
- The American Heart Association recommends limiting the amount of trans fats you consume to less than 1% of your total daily calories. So if you consume 2,000 calories a day, no more than 20 should come from trans fats, equating to less than 2 grams of trans fats a day.
- Given the amount of naturally occurring trans fats you probably eat every day, this leaves virtually no room at all for industrially manufactured trans fats.
- Read Nutrition Facts labels on food, inquire about the type of oils used at restaurants and opt for monosaturated or polyunsaturated fats.

Data from www.americanheart.org

The bulk of our trans fat American diet is artificial, from hydrogenated vegetable oils found in processed foods.

The United States Food and Drug Administration estimates that each of us consumes 4.7 pounds of trans fat each year—begging the question: Are your eating habits contributing to a possible early death?

The Big Apple says, “No more trans fats.” It began with education and a plea. In 2005, New York City’s Health Department launched a campaign to restrict the use of artificial trans fats in the city. Not originally a law, the movement started with education about how bad trans fats were for the heart. Literature was sent to 30,000 food outlets, 15,000 food suppliers and many consumers.

The two-pronged education front hoped food suppliers would understand the need and voluntarily stop using trans fats. Secondly, consumers were prodded to inquire about trans fats use.

It didn’t work; regulation enters the picture. As one might expect, companies had little “bottom line” reason to make any changes and perhaps many consumers felt powerless or still didn’t recognize the vital need to change their nutritional behavior.

A year after New York’s educational campaign, “inspectors surveyed 1,021 restaurants in 2006 . . . prevalence of artificial trans fats remained virtually unchanged at 51% in places where it could be assessed.”

A drastic call to action was needed. While perhaps controversial at the time, New York City initiated a lengthy, systematic process to remove artificial trans fats from restaurants—with the hope of subsequently reducing trans fat-associated deaths proportionately.

Food providers were given six months to remove artificial trans fats in fry oils, spreads and all other ingredients and products, including baked goods—then 18 months to completely remove them from all items. The Health Department reported a high compliance rate, noting that fast food chains reduced their saturated fats by 10.5%.

“Although regulatory approaches are not appropriate for all health risks, our society could improve health if available food choices more closely resembled those recommended for heart health,” the study said.

Could this be the population’s best solution? Artificial trans fats are so toxic for your body that a major U.S. city decided it was in the best interest of its population to negate its use. Should others follow?

Julie Gerberding, MD, MPH, and former director of the CDC, wonders if it’s now time to “institute broader federal government efforts to assure that people in all communities can experience the potential health benefits of safer dietary fats.”

“We should be prepared to do so in the future if the science indicates that the true public benefit is anywhere near what some hypothesize it to be,” Gerberding said.

What’s happened since? According to the researchers, the replacement of artificial trans fat has resulted in “products with more healthy fatty acid profiles.”

Major restaurant chains have decreased their total saturated fat and trans fat in french fries by 50%. And the wave of change is spreading.

Two years later, dozens of national food chains have altered their service by removing artificial trans fat. Other jurisdictions, such as Suffolk County on Long Island have adopted a ban on trans fats—they also now require chain restaurants to post calorie counts of menu items—and the movement is spreading outside New York State, even to California, who also is red flagging use of harmful artificial trans fats.

Several companies have joined the healthy bandwagon, including Disney, Marriott, American Airlines and Kraft Food.

Taking control—what you need to know. The best thing you can do is to avoid trans fats and saturated fats at every turn. Ask places you dine about their artificial trans fats use and make healthier choices when shopping by reading labels.

Another good place to start is with a low-glycemic nutritional plan, which is centered on nutrient-dense foods (fruits, vegetables, lean meats and essential fats).

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