

Trans Fats

You may have seen or heard in the news lately that food labels will soon contain information regarding “trans fats.” Sure, most of us have heard that trans fats are bad for us. But what are trans fats? And how can you avoid them in your diet?

First, let’s look at fats in general. There are three major types of dietary fat: saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated. We can think of trans fats as a sort of fourth category of dietary fats. Technically speaking, the term trans fat describes the chemical shape of a fat molecule, where there is a characteristic ‘twist’ within that molecule.

This ‘twisting’ is usually the result of a manufacturing process (called “hydrogenation” or “partial hydrogenation”) that changes the shape of a fat to the trans form. So why would food manufacturers want to go through the extra work and expense of chemically altering a fat, and using trans fats in their products? Because trans fats are less likely

to spoil, and extend the “shelf life” of a product.

Unfortunately, it also turns out that trans fats contribute greatly to heart disease. Trans fats are known to increase LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, while reducing HDL (“good”) cholesterol. A study published almost ten years ago estimated that 30,000 cases of death from heart disease could be directly attributed to trans fats in the diet each year. In reality, there are likely to be several additional factors beyond cholesterol effects that make trans fats so unhealthy, including increased risk of diabetes and Alzheimer’s.

The best bet when it comes to trans fats is to avoid them as completely as possible. The National Academy of Sciences has stated that the only safe level of intake for trans fats is zero. In order to avoid trans fats, being able to identify them in foods is obviously vital. That’s where the new labeling comes in, but unfortunately these new labeling regulations will not begin until 2006.

DR. PROODIAN’S HEALTH CORNER



By. Dr. James Proodian

Until then, here are some hints.

Check the ingredient labels for any “hydrogenated” or “partially hydrogenated” oils. These are surely trans fats, so avoid them if you can. “Shortening” is another buzzword for trans fats. The earlier in the ingredient list these words appear, the higher the amount of trans fats in that product.

Margarines, especially stick margarines, typically contain trans fats. However more and more “trans fat free” margarines are appearing on the market.

Fortunately, we are also beginning to see other food manufacturers making an effort to reduce or eliminate trans fats from their products. (Do you think they are doing that to improve our health? Or to avoid future lawsuits!) As an example, Oreos now have no trans fats in the chocolate cookie portion, and Kraft Foods (the

manufacturer) is reportedly working on getting the trans fats out of the cream portion. Since Americans tend not to pay close attention to food labels, having trans fats removed from more foods is going to be a big help.

What are the big offenders in terms of trans fat content? Commercially produced pastries, cookies, and crackers, French fries and other fried fast foods, doughnuts, and many coffee creamers (including the powdered varieties) are notorious for their trans fat content. Each Dunkin’ Donuts glazed donut has four grams of trans fat, while Jell-o Chocolate Pudding snacks and Chips Ahoy cookies each contain 1.5 grams of artery-clogging trans fats per serving. This may not sound like much, but remember: there is no harmless level of intake. Any trans fat consumption is another step toward health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer’s.

Another word of caution: simply because a food is free of trans fats does not automatically make it a “health food”. Trans fat content is only one consideration when it comes to choosing

healthier foods. But, because of trans fat’s role in poor health, increased awareness of its presence is an important step toward better health.

So what can you do to avoid trans fats? Try this: for the next week, read as many food ingredient labels as you can, taking note of how many of your favorite foods contain things like ‘hydrogenated’ or ‘partially hydrogenated’ ingredients. The results may surprise you, and will hopefully motivate you toward choosing healthier foods as much as possible. And as always, if there is anything I can do for you ... just ask.



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