



Words to the Wise

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FDA Takes the Fat Out of Regulation

On January 1, 2006 the FDA passed a regulation requiring all packaged foods sold in the United States to list trans fat content on their Nutrition Facts labels.

Many government dietary experts and medical researchers agree that trans fat is the unhealthiest fat, even worse than saturated fat, because it raises LDL (bad) cholesterol, while lowering HDL (good) cholesterol. It has also been shown to clog arteries, cause type II diabetes, and increase the risk of heart disease. Scientists are still investigating whether or not it inhibits metabolism and contributes to obesity.

Trans fatty acids are formed when vegetable oils are hardened into margarine or shortening. Adding hydrogen to vegetable oil, also called hydrogenation, can also artificially create trans fat.

If it's so bad, why do food companies use it? It reduces costs, extends product shelf life, and improves the flavor and texture of certain processed foods such as cookies, non-dairy creamers, and frozen and packaged goods like waffles and cereal. Many popular cookies and crackers contain 30-50% trans fat, while doughnuts range from 35-40%.

However, in response to the new FDA regulation, many food companies have begun to reduce or eliminate trans fat from certain products. Frito-Lay now fries their Doritos, Tostitos and Cheetos in corn oil and other oils that do not artificially create trans fats. Kellogg has also replaced trans fat-producing oils in products like Cheez-Its and Pop Tarts. Nestle has removed trans fats from Rolo and Toffee Crisps. Kraft has also gone through reformulation, but their new, trans fat-free Oreos will not reach stores until existing stocks are consumed. Even Girl Scout Cookies will offer five trans fat-free products this year, including their most popular cookie, the Thin Mint.

But what does trans fat-free really mean? In the United States, under FDA regulation "if the serving contains less than .5 gram of trans fat, the content, when declared, shall be called zero." Experts recommend that trans fat intake should be as low as possible, less than 1% of total daily calories, or less than two grams. If a person consumes seven servings of .4 grams of trans fat throughout the course of an entire day, that is well over the recommended daily allowance of trans fat, but they are under the impression they have consumed zero grams. In Canada, the zero cut-off is .2 gram. There are people in the US fighting to get the .5-gram cut-off lowered. Sources say that the best way to monitor trans fat is to look for the words "partially hydrogenated" or "hydrogenated" oil on the ingredients label.

Although food companies are replacing trans fats with healthier substitutes, one survey, given by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), shows that the biggest restaurant chains are continuing to use partially hydrogenated oils. Because there are no trans fat regulations on restaurants, they can freely fry with trans fat-producing oils. While several restaurants claim to be testing healthier alternatives, few have actually taken action.

A marketing/research firm, the NPD Group, conducted a study that showed 74% of adults were aware and concerned with trans fat. Food companies are meeting the ever-changing, health-conscious needs of the market across the nation. For more information relating to trans fat labeling and other marketing trends contact FoodWise Group at www.foodwisegroup.com.