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# Tracking the Trans Fat

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**Trans fat increases the risk of heart disease and diabetes.**

## Tracking the Trans Fat

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**Fries and donuts supply an excess of trans fat.**

**W**hat do doughnuts, pizza, pie crusts, popcorn, crackers, French fries, potato chips and various bakery products have in common? These all contain partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils with substantial levels of trans fatty acids. Forty percent of the trans fat in our diet originates from cakes, cookies, crackers, pies and breads; 21 percent of the total trans fat comes from shortenings and hard margarines.

The trans fatty acid content of a food is now listed on the food label, making it easier to select healthy food choices. The American Heart Association recommends that trans fats be limited to one percent of our daily calories, for a total of 2 grams per day. Typically, the average American consumes about three times that amount. A medium serving of fries supplies 8 grams of trans fat, a doughnut has 5 grams, while a Danish pastry and a small bag of potato chips each has 3 grams.

In 2008, New York City banned trans fats in all their restaurants, while Denmark and Switzerland have placed strict limits on trans fats. While restaurants and food manufacturers are making progress, trans fats are still prevalent in many foods.

Why all this concern about avoiding trans fat? Trans fat is known to raise your “bad” LDL cholesterol levels and lower your “good” HDL cholesterol levels, thereby increasing your risk of heart disease. For every two percent of energy from trans fat that replaces saturated or unsaturated fat in the diet, there is a 20–30 percent higher risk of heart attack. The use of trans fat produces proinflammatory effects such as increased interleukin-6, C-reactive protein and endothelial dysfunction, all of which negate cardiovascular health. Trans fat may also worsen insulin sensitivity, and increase the risk of insulin resistance and diabetes.



Experimental animals fed trans fat show a greater tendency to experience a gain in body weight. A new study provides evidence linking intake of trans fat with behavioral irritability and aggression.

If trans fat is so unhealthy, why do food manufacturers use hydrogenated vegetable oils? They allow food products to stay fresh on shelves longer. The margarines that are liquid or very soft at room temperature no longer contain trans fat. Margarines now contain modified palm oil to provide the desired properties. Soft tub margarines typically contain only one-third as much saturated fat as butter. One should, however, limit the use of the hard stick margarines since they may contain significant levels of trans fat.

The Food and Drug Administration allows food products containing less than one-half of a gram of trans fat to state on the label that the product contains zero grams of trans fat. This labeling can be misleading, since multiple servings of these foods could enable one to easily exceed the daily recommended limit for trans fat intake. In addition, some foods that claim zero trans fat may actually contain high levels of saturated fat. On the other hand, some foods, such as glazed doughnuts and pizza, may contain substantial amounts of both trans fat and saturated fat.

Winston Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.