

## Zero Trans Fats – The rest of the story

By Zonya Foco, R.D.

Have you heard the news? **Removing trans fats from the industrial food supply could prevent tens of thousands of premature heart attacks and cardiac deaths each year in the U.S.**, according to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health and Wageningen University.

**Partial hydrogenation of oils is the biggest food processing disaster in U.S. history**, says Walter Willett, M.D., Harvard Nutrition Researcher. Trans fats appear to deliver a “quadruple whammy.”

- 1) elevate bad cholesterol,
- 2) lower good cholesterol,
- 3) increase triglycerides,
- 4) make blood platelets stickier and thereby increase the chance of clots.



And Tommy Thompson, former HHS Secretary, gave the following warning to consumers in July 2003: **Trans fats are bad fats. The less trans fat you and I eat, the healthier we will be.**



### WOW!! How did we get into this trans fat death trap?

It all began back in the 1930s, when butter became expensive and scarce. Scientists discovered how to make an inexpensive replacement – margarine – by partially adding hydrogen to vegetable oil so it became solid and spreadable like butter. This was such an instant success that the process was soon used for making shortening. Food manufacturers loved it! It was inexpensive, offered a wonderfully long shelf life and tasted GREAT. Partially hydrogenated fats made perfect doughnuts, French fries, crackers, desserts, ie crusts, you name it. Life was good for food manufacturers, and happy consumers everywhere had a convenient solution to their expensive butter problem.

By 1970 (40 years later), it became known to the FDA that partially hydrogenated fats were causing heart disease. But how could they pull this product off the shelves or sound an alarm when partially hydrogenated fat had made its way into 40,000 food products? The ISEO (Institute of Shortening and Edible Oils) effectively muted the debate about trans fats for years, and by the year 2002, Americans were averaging at least 12 grams of trans fat a day.

### Thirty-Six Years Later: The FDA sticks a toe in

Finally by January 2006, thanks to consumer action groups like the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the FDA began requiring that all food products include trans fat content on their labels. The agency stated that as long as a product has .5 grams of trans fat or less per serving, the label can say “zero grams of trans fat per serving.” (Canada’s limit is .3 grams.) Of course this wasn’t a ban, but a gentle nudge for manufacturers to find an alternative fat if they didn’t want their product to “look bad” in the eye’s of label-savvy consumers. This was a positive step, and many margarine companies and Nabisco Oreos, Pepperidge Farm Gold Fish, Frito Lay chips did indeed step up to the plate and reduced their trans fats enough to sport “zero grams per serving” on their labels.



### An improvement, yes. But still not a gold star

Even though the use of trans fats is being drastically reduced in many food products, there are three very important points every consumer must know in order to protect themselves:

1. If the product still includes **partially hydrogenated oils** in the ingredients (which most margarines and baked goods do), the product may indeed have up to .5 grams of trans fat per serving even if the label states “zero grams of trans fats.” If you consume more than just one single serving per day, then you can indeed be eating more than the FDA recommended “as close to zero as possible” trans fats, even though you think you’re eating “zero grams.”
2. Now that manufacturers aren’t using partially hydrogenated fats, what fat are they using? This is what I like to call the “saturated fat switcheroo.” In the instance of Crisco, they fully hydrogenate the fat instead of partially. And although trans-fat free, recent studies show this “interesterified” oil lowers the good HDL cholesterol and raises blood sugar by changing the body’s levels of insulin. (A whole new set of problems!) For Jiffy baking mix, they’ve switched to lard. For many donuts, it’s palm oil (a naturally saturated fat). For the corner bakery, it’s butter. These may all be “trans fat free,” but they are also all very high in artery clogging saturated fat! You know, the other bad guy. For example, one Entenmann’s Rich Frosted Donut that is now trans fat free, has gone from containing 19 grams of total fat per donut, to 26 grams. And from 5 grams of saturated fat to 16 grams. That’s a whole days’ allotment of saturated fat in one single donut! Not to mention the refined flours, sugars, preservatives and extra 70 calories per donut! A positive change? Think again!
3. Keep in mind that restaurants and schools continue to skate along using the inexpensive, pre-prepared convenience products that still contain trans fats, or the scary replacement fats mentioned above. So just because you don’t see a label, doesn’t mean trans fats and saturated fats aren’t in there. I applaud cities like New York City who have begun a city-wide ban of trans fats in their larger restaurants. Even if all cities were to follow, you still need to remember points 1 and 2 above.



### The Bottom Line for You

So how do you keep your intake of trans fats as low as possible while making sure too many saturated fats don’t creep up in its place? Don’t throw your hands up in despair. Here are a few tactics that will help keep your “fat check” in line.

- Limit restaurant fried foods like fried chicken and French fries. Even though restaurants are slowly replacing partially hydrogenated fats, the fats they are using are generally not pure, unadulterated, unsaturated oils.

- Be mindful of the number of times you choose cookies, pastries and doughnuts and opt for low-fat bran muffins or fruit and yogurt instead. Add in a single handful of walnuts, almonds or pecans that are high in omega three “good for you” fat.
- Scrutinize the crackers you choose carefully and begin eating natural peanut butter.
- If you order pizza often, check the ingredients of the crust. You may need to go to the company’s Web site to find this, but if pizza is something you eat weekly, you need to know what’s in there!
- Serve olive oil with bread, as authentic Italian restaurants do.
- Make your garlic toast and grilled sandwiches with a spritz of oil, not butter or margarine.
- Sauté onions in oil instead of butter or margarine. Remember butter is more saturated than lard, and contains cholesterol, so it’s not a great choice either.
- Buy from companies like Eden Foods ([www.EdenFoods.com](http://www.EdenFoods.com)) and Kashi ([www.kashi.com](http://www.kashi.com)) that have always been committed to never using trans fats in anything. Pure oils, as nature intended and in proper amounts only, is something these companies have always used.
- The fats we should be “saving” ourselves for are the beneficial monounsaturated oils and omega three fatty acids known to reduce inflammation in the body like the fat from salmon, almonds, walnuts, flax seed and avocados.
- In a nutshell, follow what I call the one-two punch: First keep fat intake to as low as possible, then add back the good omega three fats like olive oil on your salad or walnuts in your cereal. Works like a charm!

### **Don’t ignore the giant elephant in the room**

Remember, while everyone’s captivated by the latest trans fat headline, “Wendy’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken change their frying oil to trans fat free,” don’t be suckered into overlooking the giant elephant in the room – unhealthy habits. Trans fats or not, Americans eat too many calories by the way of too much fat, sugar and refined carbohydrates and don’t eat enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains. And most of us don’t get near enough physical activity. Getting rid of trans fats is a step in the right direction, but there’s still plenty of dietary “work” to be done toward gaining an overall healthy lifestyle.

