

Holiday Season Prescription for Trans-Fatty Temptations: Leave Portly Government Policies Out

By Diana M. Ernst

The holiday season is here and merry Americans are filling their shopping bags and stomachs with celebratory “surplus.” As a result, the giving season always bears unwelcome gifts for hips and bellies. Of course, too much fat is nothing to celebrate, but recently, it’s not about the amount but rather the kind of fat you eat. Trans fats are the worst among them. As usual, government has arrived at the scene like an anti-fat super hero to save Americans from themselves.

Some states are even considering banning trans fats from grocery stores and restaurants altogether. Even so, Americans will continue to make their own eating choices. State politicians should deal with more pressing priorities and cities should avoid needlessly complicated bans and regulations on trans fats. Instead they should ask some hard questions.

Is the news on trans fats just the latest hyperbole about the dangers of modern living, or do trans-fatty acids really merit our concern? Remember when saturated fats were the worst? Remember when just plain “fat” was the worst?

Organizations like the American Heart Association (AHA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) say that trans fats are even worse for you than saturated fats, because they raise bad, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL) in our bodies, and also lower good, high density-lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL). Saturated fats raise both types of cholesterol. Also making the case against trans fats is BanTransFats.com Inc., an organization run by the trial lawyer who sued Kraft because of trans fat content in Oreo™ cookies.¹

Trans fats are found in partially hydrogenated ingredients. Hydrogenation is a process whereby hydrogen is added to naturally unsaturated fatty acids. This appeals to food makers and restaurant owners because partially hydrogenated products do not spoil as quickly. Foods processed in this way include most

fast foods, frozen foods and bakery items, but also margarine, shortening, some candy, cookies, crackers, doughnuts, fried chicken, salad dressings, and some cereals.² Not all the trans fats that we consume, however, are unnatural.

Trans fats exist naturally in animal products like beef, pork, lamb and butterfat in milk and butter, because ruminants like cows also hydrogenate oil with the bacteria in their stomachs. According to a study by the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) published last spring, the existing evidence on the effects of trans fats from ruminant products is fairly limited. In fact, most efforts have supported an increase in the level of linolenic acid (a trans-fatty acid produced from trans fats in ruminants) because of its supposed health *benefits*.³

As for the different effects posed by trans fats in processed foods versus those from ruminants, the reasons remain unclear. The NEJM article notes that the risk of coronary heart disease from trans fats, which is relatively higher in processed foods, may be attributed to different levels of consumption, different biological effects of ruminant and processed products, or the presence of other factors in ruminant products that counter the effects of their trans fats.⁴

The NEJM study noted an increased potential risk for heart disease posed by consumption of relatively small quantities of trans fatty acids in processed foods. This was the conclusion according to short-term randomized trials. Approximately 1.2 million Americans die from coronary heart disease annually. The authors of the study estimate that the near elimination of industrially produced trans fats might prevent 72,000 to 228,000, or six to 19 percent of incidences of cardiovascular heart disease each year.⁵ Needless to say, this apparently shocking estimate has unleashed groups like the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) on an unsuspecting public.

In an alarmist fashion, it attacks the FDA for not banning trans fats and goes after the food industry, company by company, for using them. CSPI just withdrew a lawsuit against Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) because the food chain recently promised to ban trans fats from all of its products. CSPI's executive director Michael Jacobson has more than hinted that Starbucks is on his hit list for its use of partially hydrogenated oil in pastries, even though Starbucks already releases all of its nutritional information online.⁶ If the vigilant CSPI had its all-or-nothing way, it would doubtless support unlimited government control over our diets in order to ban all things potentially harmful or unhealthy.⁷

The authors of the NEJM study, however, note that reducing trans fat intake can happen with consumers' *decisions* to choose foods free of trans fatty acids, and that providers and physicians can assist them in their decision-making. Most importantly, the authors acknowledge that the reduction of trans fats could be achieved by either legislation or voluntary efforts by food manufacturers *to* use alternative fats.⁸

What CSPI altogether avoids is the long term established evidence, which shows that even though food companies have used partially hydrogenated fats since the 1920s, heart disease has decreased drastically, 60 percent in the United States since 1950. From 586.9 deaths per 100,000 people in 1950, the numbers plunged to 232.3 deaths per 100,000 people in 2003.⁹

Americans today are informed. They smoke less, eat healthier, balanced diets, and have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than before. They also have improved medical care and specialists helping them to detect and prevent heart disease and stroke.¹⁰ Those who think trans fats are indeed a weighty issue can be assured that the FDA has done more than enough to *keep* Americans informed, first by requiring that saturated fat and cholesterol be listed on food labels in 1993, and trans fats as of last January. By law, Americans can stay educated about how much fat, saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol they consume in the products they purchase.¹¹ And if this isn't enough, restaurants are banning trans fats from their meals.

All the restaurants in Tiburon, California stopped using trans fats, and all of Wendy's more than 6,000 restaurants nationwide have replaced trans fats with non-hydrogenated oil alternatives. Recently, KFC followed suit, announcing that all of its restaurants nationwide will use unhydrogenated cooking oil. Even Disneyland has proposed trans fat restrictions. Many argue that this shift to alternatives can happen without costly or flavorless repercussions.¹² However, some politicians say that these voluntary changes are not enough.

New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and Los Angeles are considering all out trans fat bans. Should this really be a top priority for our local leaders? Representatives of the restaurant industry like E. Charles Hunt, executive vice president of the New York State Restaurant Association, are upset by this top-down government restriction, and contend that it could be harmful for business.¹³ Meanwhile, what are the alternatives to trans fats, and will this be a challenging shift for the food industry?

KFC finally came up with low linolenic soybean oil after two years of extensive research. Linolenic acid is the main culprit for making products susceptible to rapid spoilage, but instead of partially hydrogenating the oil to maintain the shelf life of products, food producers have grown soybeans with low levels of linolenic acid, producing soybean oil less likely to go rancid.¹⁴

Some unsaturated vegetable oils, including olive, canola, corn, and sunflower oil, are new alternatives to trans fats for restaurateurs. Innovative new methods for processing these oils are also an option, but some scientists caution against impulsive, man-made procedures so that we don't experience the trans-fat quandary all over again. Another option is to simply go back to saturated fats, like butter or lard, but use them in small quantities. Some nutritionists question whether some saturated fats are as bad as others.¹⁵

For example, tropical oils such as palm oil were condemned twenty years ago because they are highly saturated. This was right about the time that the food industry started using partially hydrogenated fats instead. But when these became the new evil, food companies began seeking alternatives, and tropical oil imports to the U.S. from places like Malaysia increased dramatically, by more than 100,000 tons between 2003 and 2004. Now it seems that tropical oil imports may slow again with the discovery of new farming and processing techniques, such as KFC's low linolenic soybean oil.¹⁶

Nutritionists used to say that trans fats were harmless. Such flip flop, coupled with recent speculation, is bound to confuse, so let's keep the latest possible threat in perspective. Food marketers are on the right track and so are Americans. Every dollar wasted on government regulation and trial lawyers would be better spent by businesses developing healthier cooking oils in response to *our* preferences. This holiday season, let that serve as healthy food for thought.

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