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Tuesday, April 24, 2007 edition Updated: Apr 11, 2007 - 16:10:28 EDT



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Trans-fats What's the big fat deal?

By Beth Anne Piehl Special to the News-Review

Story updated: Wednesday, April 11, 2007 4:10 PM EDT

It started with good intentions.

Food manufacturers, many years ago, went looking for a way to make liquid oils into solid fats to create a spread that had a longer shelf life than liquid oils. The manufacturers took unsaturated fat - the good kind - and whipped it with hydrogen (called "hydrogenation").

Uh-oh.

"By changing the shape of the molecules when the hydrogen was added, it now made the fat unhealthy. Basically, hydrogenation changes the structure of unsaturated fats and makes them like saturated fat, so now they are considered a health risk," explained Diane Rellinger, family and consumer sciences educator with the MSU Extension for Charlevoix and Emmet counties.

Make that a Super Size uh-oh: Trans fat, it turns out, makes things taste really good, and Americans tend to like that. And trans fat is found everywhere, in french fries, crackers, doughnuts and fried foods of all nationalities.

Inside the body, trans fats can clog arteries, raise cholesterol and cause heart attacks and heart disease.

"We've heard for a long time about saturated fat and now the new buzzword is trans fat, or trans-fatty acids," said Rellinger. "They're doing the same things as saturated fat. We need to be really careful how much fat we're putting into our bodies."

How bad is it?

So bad that in December the New York City Board of Health voted to ban NYC



A nice plate of walleye prepared without trans-fats.

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restaurants from using trans fats in their cooking.

So bad that eliminating trans fats from the U.S. food supply could prevent between 6 and 19 percent of heart attacks and related deaths a year, according to the Harvard School of Public Health.

So bad that the FDA required food manufacturers to list trans fat (or trans fatty acids) on their nutrition labels beginning in January 2006, alerting consumers to its presence.

Rellinger cautioned consumers to know how to read the labels, and to understand that any amount below 0.5 grams does not have to be included, so a product could still contain trans fat and eaten in multiple servings, it could still be health-harming. She advised consumers to look for the word "hydrogenated" in the ingredients as an indicator of the trans fat presence.

With the recent months of media attention to the trans-fat issue, Rellinger said consumers are paying attention.

"Young families and seniors are always asking me to tell them more about fats," she said. "They're really good questions."

Scalawags makes the switch

At least one local restaurant has stopped using trans fats in its cooking, and customers have been pleased, according to its owner.

Scalawags founder and franchiser Brian Parker said the Petoskey, Mackinaw City and Rochester Hills locations have all stopped frying in oil that contains trans fats. Instead, the restaurant chain, which deep fries most of its menu options, is using a canola corn oil combination with zero trans fat grams.

Parker initiated the change last fall.

"We're health oriented to what people want to eat," said Parker. "Our society has become more conscientious of what they're putting in their bodies."

The fresh whitefish, perch and other seafood, as well as chicken meals and other battered-and-fried items, taste lighter, he said.

"Fish from the Great Lakes is all organic, and that's what people want right now," said Parker, who has been in the food industry for 35 years. "(The canola corn combination oil) is a healthier product to work with. Customers say it has enhanced the quality and the taste.

He added: "Fried food is not an unhealthy thing to eat if you're using the right ingredients."

The worst trans-fatty foods

Stick margarine: The poster child for what trans fat looks like. The harder the margarine, the more trans fat.

Chips and crackers: Trans fat is the glue that holds them together.

Breakfast foods: That includes sugar-free muffins and breakfast bars, pancakes and anything cooked on a coated griddle.

Baked goods: Nutritionists use the word "heaping" to describe the amount of trans fat in these goodies, like doughnuts and cookies.

Restaurant and grocery-store prepared foods: Anything that's touched by hydrogenated oil is a no-no, including fried chicken, chicken wings, fries, Chinese food, etc.

Source: health.msn.com

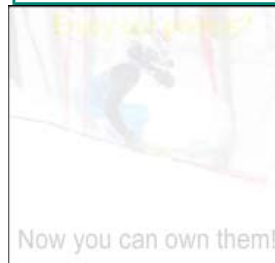
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Fats are a major source of energy for the body and they aid in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E and K and carotenoids. Fat is particularly important for proper growth and development in infants and children up to age 2.

Fat also adds taste, consistency and stability to food.

There are good fats; they are called unsaturated, monounsaturated or polyunsaturated. Olive, sunflower and corn oils are healthier options for cooking. Avocados and most nuts are sources for good fat.

Source: MSU Extension, Charlevoix and Emmet counties, health.msn.com

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