



Trans fat info soon will be on food labels

The Nutrition Facts panel on food products is about to undergo a slight facelift. Between now and 2006, a new line of information is being added to help consumers make decisions that may promote short- and long-term health. The new line says "Trans Fat" and indicates the amount of trans fatty acids present in a food.

Question: What is trans fat?

Answer: Trans fat contains the trans fatty acids that are found in hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated fats or oils. These are contained in many common foods made with vegetable shortening and most types of margarine.

Some journalists are using the name "Frankenfat." This is an overstatement, as trans fats are present naturally in some foods and are not all bad or totally foreign to the human body.

Q: Why is trans fat being added to the food label?

A: Diets containing high levels of trans fat are associated with an increase in blood levels of the LDL, or "bad" form of blood cholesterol. This, in turn,

is associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease.

Q: How important is avoiding trans fat to the prevention of coronary heart disease?

A: The Food and Drug Administration says about 13 million people in the United States suffer from coronary heart disease and more than 500,000 die each year from related causes. By 2009, the FDA estimates that trans fat labeling will decrease those deaths by 250 to 500 cases per year, about one-tenth of 1 percent.

Obviously, trans fat is just one of many risk factors. Simply avoiding it will not eliminate the risk of coronary heart disease, nor will eating plenty of trans fat guarantee developing the condition. Trans fat has simply been added to the jumble of risk factors thought to increase the risk of coronary heart disease.

Q: Are all trans fats bad?

A: No. Milk fat contains a form of trans fat called conjugated linoleic acid that has been shown to *inhibit* the development of coronary heart disease

and cancer. This acid may even reduce the uptake of fat into fat cells and help prevent fat gain.

Trans fat's contribution to coronary heart disease is relatively small compared to smoking and being overweight and sedentary. Like dietary cholesterol, trans fat has a small but statistically significant effect on LDL cholesterol levels. However, neither trans fat nor dietary cholesterol has as much effect as a diet high in saturated fat.

Trans fat labeling empowers consumers with information that helps them know more about what they are eating. But this is just one more arrow in the quiver of arrows that may help to shoot down coronary heart disease. The best tools remain: not smoking, maintaining a healthy body weight, getting plenty of physical activity daily and eating a varied, balanced diet that includes lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and modest amounts of everything else.

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