

FDA Weighs In On Trans Fat Safety, Considers Ban

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By Katherine Basbaum, MS, RD

As a dietitian, one of the biggest (and most challenging) parts of my job is steering my patients in the right direction when it comes to purchasing packaged foods. I can't ask them to completely give up their favorite crackers, cookies and other baked goods (that would be just plain cruel), but it is my responsibility to educate and advise patients regarding the safest and most nutritious choices on the grocery store shelf.

One major way to do this is to stay away from products that contain trans-fatty acids, or trans fats. It's easier to do since in the last few years many food companies have voluntarily removed trans fats from their products. But the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has concluded that the voluntary replacement of such fats has not progressed far enough to adequately protect Americans from the negative cardiac health dangers that they pose.



On Nov. 7, the FDA announced that it will remove partially hydrogenated oils that contain trans fats from the Generally Recognized As Safe or G.R.A.S. list, and in 60 days, if the FDA still deems trans fats unsafe after the public weighs in, then foods containing these unapproved food additives will be banned. When asked for his thoughts on this bold move by the FDA, Dr. Chris Rembold, UVA cardiologist says, "Having this ban on trans fats is a very good idea. We basically should not be eating them."

What foods out there still contain trans fats and will be affected by the new ban?

Here are a few:

- Doughnuts
- Canned Frosting
- Microwave and Movie Popcorn
- Frozen Pizza
- Refrigerated Dough
- Crackers
- Coffee Creamers

This is a big, BIG win in the fight against heart disease. Why? Let's review...

A big fat lesson

Invented in the early 1900s, trans fats gained momentum and were used in the 1950s as a way to increase the shelf life of processed foods. Then in the '60s and '70s when the dangers of saturated fat and cholesterol were widely publicized, the food industry needed a "healthier" alternative that could perform as well as animal fats and tropical oils, i.e. become solid at room temperature and make yummy, crispy fries. Food manufacturers began to use trans fats more regularly and their usage increased significantly.

Science to the rescue?

In the U.S. at the time, there was an abundance of inexpensive fat in the form of soybean oil, but there were limitations to this cheap commodity: Soybean oil was liquid at room temperature, so it couldn't be used to make a substitute for stick butter. Plus, soybean oil was a sub-par option for frying because it didn't hold up well at high temperatures. With these limitations in mind, food scientists developed "partial hydrogenation," an industrial process by which hydrogen is added to liquid vegetable oils to make them solid at room temperature and more resilient in high heat cooking situations like frying. The addition of these tiny hydrogen atoms had a huge negative effect on the way these synthetically produced trans fats reacted in our bodies. For example, *trans* fats raise bad (LDL) cholesterol, which can build up in the walls of your arteries and lead to atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), heart attack and stroke. Trans fats also have the unfortunate effect of lowering your good (HDL) cholesterol levels, the kind that picks up excess cholesterol and takes it back to your liver for disposal.

Footloose and trans fat free ... Not so fast!

While there is definitely cause for celebration over this good news about a very bad fat, it's important to keep in mind that knowing a food doesn't contain trans fats should not give it a free pass into your grocery cart; you'll still need to take a look at total calories, saturated fats, sodium and sugar to know if it truly is a smart choice. It's likely the scientists will come up with a manufactured fat to replace the banned trans fats, but that doesn't mean it will be any safer and should be taken lightly. As always, it's best to eat whole foods, ones in their most natural state. For ideas on healthy meals and snacks, make sure to visit our [recipe page](#).

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