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CONTACT: Jennifer Hanson

(612) 798-7231

(800) 999-4859

jhanson@mediarelations.com

Don't wait for FDA labeling: avoid trans fats NOW

It's not as simple as keeping your hand out of the cookie jar

Health professionals and savvy consumers are praising the FDA's new rule requiring trans fatty acids to be listed on food labels. Unfortunately, companies have until 2006 to comply. Worse, there will not be guidelines for safe consumption levels. So what should consumers do right now?

Choose your oils wisely

To avoid the health risks, consumers are urged to cook and bake with oils that do not contain trans fats such as palm oil, and to look for food labels that list palm oil as an ingredient. Palm oil is a naturally trans-free vegetable oil. Because of its natural semi-solid consistency, it does not need to go through the hydrogenation process that creates trans fatty acids. Palm oil-based food products have an extended shelf life since palm oil is extremely stable against the onset of rancidity and oxidative deterioration. And because of its oxidative stability, palm oil is one of the best frying oils used widely around the world.

"Consumers shouldn't be alarmed if they see palm oil on the labels," says Dr. K.C. Hayes, a professor of biology (nutrition) and director of Foster Biomedical Research Laboratory and Animal Resources at Brandeis University. "Instead they should be pleased because palm oil is free of hydrogenation and contains healthy antioxidants."

What is trans fat?

Trans fatty acids are partially saturated (or partially hydrogenated) fats that do not occur naturally in foods, except in small quantities in some dairy products. They are the product of a manufacturing process used to make some foods creamier and to extend their shelf life. They are so risky that America's Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences says even the smallest amount is not safe to eat.

"People still don't understand the bad impact that trans fatty acids can have on the blood cholesterol," says Dr. Hayes. "It raises the bad cholesterol and lowers the good, and has been strongly linked to the incidence of Type II diabetes, which is sweeping the population like a storm." Hayes praised the FDA's new rule because it once again brought the dangers of trans fatty acids into America's living rooms.

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Some studies indicate that trans fat raises cholesterol levels, thereby increasing the risk for heart disease. There also is evidence that trans fat may contribute to diabetes and cancer. According to

the Food & Drug Administration (FDA), if food manufacturers would remove all trans fats from margarines, and just three percent from commercial baked goods, it could prevent 17,000 heart attacks and save 5,000 lives annually in the United States.

Products you may want to avoid

Products are likely to contain trans fatty acids if hydrogenated fat is listed among their ingredients. These may include foods made with, or cooked in hydrogenated vegetable oil such as crackers, and fried snack foods such as potato chips. Trans fats are also found in cookies, cakes and doughnuts, as well as margarine and hydrogenated vegetable shortening.

Think cereals are safe? According to the FDA, almost half of all cereals, both hot and cold, contain trans fatty acid. So do 80 percent of frozen breakfast foods like waffles. Even healthier-sounding products like granola, power bars and low-fat cookies are often made with partially hydrogenated fats.

More information on palm oil is available on the Internet at www.americanpalmoil.com.

Media Note: For more information or to arrange an interview with Dr. K.C. Hayes, contact Media Relations at (800) 999-4859. You may also visit www.mpopc.org.my

Biography: K.C. Hayes, Ph.D.

Dr. K.C. Hayes is a professor of biology (nutrition) and director of Foster Biomedical Research Laboratory and Animal Resources at Brandeis University, positions he has held for more than 17 years.

Dr. Hayes is the author or co-author of more than 160 reports, 23 chapters and 175 abstracts on various topics related to nutrition. He has served on the editorial boards for the *Journal of Nutrition* and the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

Dr. Hayes earned his B.S. in English and pre-med at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, in 1961. He earned his D.V.M. in veterinary medicine from Cornell University in 1965, and he earned his Ph.D. in nutritional pathology from the University of Connecticut at Storrs in 1968.