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Nutrition experts renew focus on the health risks of trans fatty acids

Without labeling, consumers may not know how to protect themselves

New findings by America's Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences claim that there is no known safe intake amount of artery clogging trans fatty acids in the diet. This news may soon result in the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) requiring the listing of trans fatty acids on food nutrition labels.

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.

The Institute of Medicine's report is the result of a petition filed in 1994 by the Center for Science in the Public Interest requesting that the FDA require food manufacturers to list trans fatty acids as part of the "Nutrition Facts" on food labels. The FDA is considered likely to require that all food manufacturers disclose the amount of trans fatty acids in their products.

Until then, consumers must learn how to recognize and avoid foods containing trans fatty acids, or possibly suffer an increased risk of heart disease. Trans fatty acids increase the body's levels of LDL ("bad" cholesterol) while decreasing its levels of HDL ("good" cholesterol). There is also evidence that trans fat may cause cancer.

According to the 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 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.

McDonald's recently made headlines when it announced plans to halve the amount of trans fatty acid levels in its French fries by using a new oil developed by Minnesota-based Cargill, Inc. Still, consumers can do much more to lower their trans fatty acid intake.

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One of the easiest steps to take is to cook and bake with oils that do not contain trans fats. Palm oil is one example of a naturally trans-free vegetable oil. Palm oil is also an excellent source of tocotrienols, an essential form of vitamin E that has been shown to help prevent heart disease and strokes by reversing atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), helping to lower cholesterol and reducing unhealthy blood clotting. The palm tocotrienol complex was also reported by six independent research institutions to inhibit estrogen-negative and estrogen-positive breast cancer cells.

To avoid hydrogenated fats in manufactured goods, consumers should look for food labels that list palm oil as an ingredient. Palm oil is non GMO and has been used worldwide in different food products, especially in margarines, snacks, fries and baked goods. Because of palm oil's natural semi-solid consistency, it does not need to go through the hydrogenation process that creates trans fatty acids.

Manufacturers can help improve public health by using palm oil instead of oils containing trans fatty acids. Palm oil-based food products has 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.

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 the 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 earned his Ph.D. in nutritional pathology from the University of Connecticut at Storrs in 1968.