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HEADLINE: Clues on labels reveal hidden trans fats

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BODY:

When government researchers earlier this month said no amount of trans fat was safe to eat, consumers hurried to their pantry shelves.

But once they got there, they were stumped.

That's because food manufacturers don't have to list the amount of trans fat on the nutrition panel -- even though it can be found in more than 40 percent of the food on supermarket shelves.

Trans fat is a processed fat formed by partially hydrogenating edible oil. Crisco is a perfect example. But a growing body of research has definitively connected it to heart attacks and strokes, because it wreaks havoc on blood cholesterol. Although the Food and Drug Administration plans to require food manufacturers to include trans fat amounts on nutrition labels, the process could take a year or more. Until then, there is no easy way to determine exactly how much trans fat is in a given product. However, there are a few tricks to arrive at fairly close estimates. Our at-a-glance guide will explain some of them.

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Trans fat at a glance

A recent federal report recommends consumers eat as little trans fat as possible. Limiting trans fat is tough -- especially since the ingredient is not clearly labeled on food packages. Still, it's in more than 40,000 products. Here are some ways to ferret out the fat.

What is it?

Trans fat (trans-fatty acids) is formed when oil is hydrogenated, a manufacturing process in which hydrogen atoms are mixed with non-saturated liquid oil from plants like corn or soy beans. The result is fat that stays relatively solid at room temperature. Think of trans fat essentially as shortening or margarine. It's why your pie crust is so flaky and why Ritz crackers stay crisp. It prolongs shelf life, which is why commercial bakeries love it. Some naturally occurring trans fats can be found in small

amounts in beef and high-fat dairy products because trans fat is produced in the gastrointestinal lining of cattle.

Why is it bad for you?

Trans fat causes heart disease and can lead to heart attacks and strokes, according to an influential report issued July 10 by the National Academies of Sciences. The report summarized several studies that showed trans fat raises levels of the waxy cholesterol that clogs blood vessels and strips the good kind of cholesterol. Other studies have connected trans fat to a broader range of health problems, like insulin resistance, which can lead to diabetes, and possibly cancer.

How much is safe?

The National Academies of Sciences report said no level of trans fat is safe. But the researchers recognized that it would be impossible to remove trans fat from the American diet, because it's in more than 40,000 products on supermarket shelves. Their answer, short of an all-out ban, is to recommend that people eat as little as possible..

What to look for on the label

First, look to see if partially hydrogenated oil is in the the ingredient list. How much depends on how high on the list those words appear. Products that list cold/expeller pressed oils, poly- or monounsaturated oils, olive oil, coconut oil, palm oil and other liquid oils likely won't have trans fat.

Note the amount of total fat listed and compare it to the breakdown of specific fats on the label. If there is a difference between the total number of fat grams and saturated fat grams, the unaccounted-for grams may come from trans fat.

The tricky thing is that not all fats will be broken out on nutrition labels. Heart-clogging saturated fat is the only fat required by law to be listed. Food packages that make specific health claims -- like "low cholesterol" or "reduced fat" -- must list poly- or monounsaturated fats along with saturated fats.

In some products, particularly cookies and crackers, a ballpark trans fat amount can be determined by using the saturated fat amount as a guide. The label on Chips Ahoy cookies, for example, lists 2 grams of saturated fat and 4 grams of total fat per serving. The additional 2 grams may be trans fat. In another example, Bisquick lists 6 grams of total fat, but only 1 1/2 of it marked as saturated. Because partially hydrogenated oil is so high on the ingredient list, the best assumption is that most of the remaining 4 1/2 fat grams are trans fat..

Foods that can have lots of hidden trans fat

Fast food: Most fast-food and family-style chain restaurants cook fries, chicken and other deep-fried foods in partially hydrogenated oil, which often comes in a solid block that's melted in the fryer. They also slather margarine -- which is trans fat -- on griddles for pancakes and grilled

sandwiches. To get an idea of how much trans fat is in fast food, consider a KFC Original Recipe chicken dinner. It has 7 grams of trans fat, mostly from the chicken and biscuit. Even if the chains use some of the newer liquid, non-trans oils for frying, fries are sometimes par-fried in trans fat before they are shipped to the restaurants.

**Baked Goods:** This is the heaviest trans fat territory. Most mass-produced convenience and commercial bakery goods like cookies and cakes have plenty of trans fat. Cakes and shortening-based frostings from supermarket bakeries are particularly trans-heavy. So are doughnuts, which can contain shortening in the dough and also be cooked in trans fat. Generally, the higher quality the baked good, the less trans fat, because more butter is used.

**Chips and crackers:** To keep them crisp, manufacturers pump crackers full of shortening. Even crackers labeled "reduced fat" can still have trans fat. Watch for anything fried, like potato chips and corn chips, as well as "buttery" crackers.

**Spreads, sauces and mixes:** Margarine can be pure trans fat. As a general rule, the softer the margarine, the less artery-clogging fat it contains. There are some trans-fat-free spreads on the market and increasingly are labeled as such. Watch out for high trans-fat levels in nondairy creamers and flavored coffees, as well as in ready-made dips, including some bean dips, whipped toppings, gravy mixes and products like Hamburger Helper. Cake, biscuit and cornmeal mixes can have several grams of trans fat per serving.

**Unexpected places:** Breakfast cereals, breakfast bars, some energy bars, tortillas, microwave popcorn, fish sticks or other breaded frozen foods all can contain trans fat. So can some puddings and peanut butters, where it is used to give a creamier consistency. Frozen foods like pot pies, frozen pizzas and other entrees, even if labeled as lower in fat, are often made with trans fat. Very high levels can be found in packaged instant noodles like ramen and soup cups.

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Project ID: jennifer Document 2 of 3