

Global Oils and Fats Forum: 2005

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Oils and Fats: MythInformation

Myths and misinformation abound in the U.S. and around the world. Of course we are all aware of the famous Greek myths. Today we read about those with amusement, yet ancient Greeks' lives were directly influenced on a daily basis. During the international chess match with Bobby Fisher in the 1970s, the media reported that a survey revealed that 86 percent of the population in Iceland believed in elves. Closer to home, many still think alligators live in the sewers of New York City. Sure, we can laugh at those myths and legends, but others have health consequences for misinformed consumers.

Tomatoes are members of the nightshade family of plants, sometimes referred to as deadly nightshade. And once upon a time, people feared that tomatoes were poisonous and thus refused to eat them. Early religious prohibitions against eating pork probably had their origins in health problems such as trichinosis. Today we know that properly prepared pork is perfectly safe.

When I was a child, kids were told by concerned mothers not to sit too close to the TV or our eyes would be damaged. Science has proven that to be incorrect. Mothers today think that sugar causes their children to be hyperactive, despite the fact that a number of solid research studies have discredited that idea that started in the '70s but persists until now. And many swear that milk causes mucous, causing countless women who desperately need calcium to prevent osteoporosis to avoid dairy products.

Perversely, the evolution of scientific knowledge can actually result in serious health problems. And that brings me to the problems with what we know or at least think we know about fats and oils and their role in health in general and heart health in particular. To put things into full perspective, we have to go back decades in time.

Doctors working in Framingham, Massachusetts, learned by observing men over a long period of time that there was an association between deaths by heart attack and cholesterol. Simply enough, when heart attack victims were autopsied, doctors found the same cholesterol in blockages in their arteries as found in the foods they ate. Back then it was a radical idea to suggest cutting back on dietary cholesterol.

The next culprit turned out to be saturated fat. In fact it was more responsible than cholesterol itself in raising cholesterol levels in the blood, a proven risk factor for developing heart disease. No longer was it radical to recommend dietary modifications including less cholesterol and saturated fat.

But look what happens when people follow that advice to an extreme and replace the major sources of sat fats and cholesterol with plant-based foods. Sure, levels of the

detrimental LDL come down, but so does the protective HDL cholesterol in the blood. And triglycerides, an independent risk factor itself, go up. It's no surprise, in retrospect, that following those recommendations didn't have much impact on reducing the incidence of heart attacks. In fact, it was only after the powerful cholesterol-lowering statin drugs entered the picture that the theory of lowering blood cholesterol to prevent heart disease and reduce the number of heart attacks was proven to be a fact.

What else happened when people cut way back on fat and protein in favor of plant foods? The food industry came along with non-fat cookies, cakes, ice cream, potato chips—you name it. The people went wild with the idea that they could eat all they wanted and stay healthy. Again, up went their triglycerides, and, in the process, up went the national problem of overweight and obesity. Of course, the pendulum then swung the other way, and soon men and women were skipping their breads and fruits and vegetables and gobbling bacon, eggs, cheese, and hamburgers without the buns. The good news here is that it appears that many people have not found a happy medium. Of course, we still have a long way to go in terms of the national disgrace of obesity and diabetes, appearing in ever-younger people. The latest statistics indicate that this will be the first generation of children with shorter life expectancies than those of their parents. Sad, very sad.

But the ill-effects of the anti-saturated fat craze are still being felt. A quick tour down the aisles of any supermarket proves that. Pick up packages of cookies and crackers and tubs of margarine and you see the words “partially hydrogenated oils” on the ingredients list. Why? Because we had to get rid of those saturated fats. Margarine was perceived to be far healthier than butter. Another nutritional myth was born and thrived.

Then up jumped the devil. Researchers learned that the process of partial hydrogenation produces trans-fatty acids. These fats, wolves in sheep's clothing, turn out to be worse than the saturated fats they replace. They not only lower LDL but also play havoc with HDL counts, seriously worsening the important LDL/HDL risk ratio. And the latest studies show that the trans-fats also worsen levels of inflammation, now known to be as important in initiating and progressing heart disease as cholesterol levels in the blood. It is becoming routine for physicians to monitor their patients levels of hs-CRP, an indicator of inflammation in the arteries.

A couple of years the National Institutes of Medicine, a division of the National Institutes of Health in Washington studied the research data on the importance of trans fats. Their recommendation was dramatic: there is NO safe level of human consumption.

As most of you know, as of January, 2006, all processed and manufactured food products must have a declaration of the amount of trans fats found in a serving of that food. Many companies are way ahead of the curve, proudly proclaiming on their package fronts the words “No Trans Fats.” And because of the tremendous amount of publicity this issue has gotten in the mass media, consumers are paying attention.

Now, don't get me wrong. If every man and woman, boy and girl, in this country paid attention to health advice across the board, no one would be overweight, everyone would

be in tip-top physical condition, and incidence of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and many other ailments would be plummeting.

But every now and then, the public picks up on something it decides it can do without too much sacrifice. It's pretty easy to choose a product without trans fats, with none of that nasty partially hydrogenated oil. So why not do it? So now the ball is solidly in the court of the food companies and everyone involved in the food industry. Face it, folks, trans fats and partially hydrogenated oils are things of the past. At least when it comes to foods that have to reveal their presence. We won't get into the whole issue of the fast food industry and all those yummy deep-fried goodies Americans can't get enough of. The success of the Enormous Breakfast Sandwich and the Gargantuan Triple Bacon-Cheese Burger served with massive mounds of French fries speaks for itself.

So what to do about replacing partially hydrogenated oils? Untreated soybean or canola oils won't work. Palm oil, it turns out, provides a perfect alternative. No trans fats. No cholesterol. But what palm oil does have, sadly, is a lot of baggage packed with more of that mythinformation.

As is true with practically all myths, there's a nugget of truth at the core. I'll bet there was at least one baby alligator that got flushed down a toilet. And kids do get overstimulated at birthday parties where they gorge on cakes and ice cream and candy and sodas, even though sugar isn't the culprit. And the truth is that palm oil does, indeed, have 49 percent saturated fat. As such, it has been lumped along with coconut oil and palm kernel oil into the group termed the "tropical oils" that have been black-listed as being bad for the heart.

Personally, I don't care a fig about dispelling those myths about alligators in New York's sewers or the elves in Iceland. But as a medical journalist, and a crusader against heart disease, I care a whole lot about the public misperception of palm oil.

Just for the record, I'm a heart disease survivor myself. I have quite a medical history. A heart attack at age 35 in 1978 with a triple-bypass surgery that same year, and a second bypass, that time a quadruple, at age 41 in 1984. The mere fact that I'm standing here before you today pays testimony to the fact that I've been doing something right for the past 21-plus years, currently living a life with no limitations and glowing reports from the cardiologists who routinely monitor my heart.

My books and my quarterly publication The Diet-Heart Newsletter do more than pay the bills for my family. They give me a chance to share the information that has, quite literally, saved my own life and allowed me to stick around to watch my two children grow up, something that my father, who died of a heart attack at 57, wasn't able to do. And I want to do something else my Dad didn't have a chance to do. I want to meet my grandchildren some day and bounce them on my knee. I think I'm going to be one hell of a good grandpa.

And that's why I continue to do everything I possibly can to stay healthy in general and heart healthy in particular. If I thought for even one moment that palm oil is bad for my heart, raises my cholesterol, not a single product containing it would be in my pantry or refrigerator. And I wouldn't be advising my loyal readers to actively seek out foods with palm oil. That's the truth. And I'm too old and too financially successful for any company to pay me to tell lies that could hurt others. I'd retire and spend my time improving my golf swing instead.

But what I know is what I'm trying to get through to the public. Palm oil is different from the other tropical oils. The fatty acid, namely palmitic acid, does not raise LDL cholesterol in the same way that lauric and myristic acids from butter, beef and pork fat, and coconut and palm kernel oil do. In fact, palm oil actually raises HDL levels when consumed as part of a heart healthy diet. The work done at Brandeis University here in America and in Malaysia proves that. And there are an increasing number of health authorities who have objectively reviewed the data and have come to the same conclusion.

So why does the palm oil myth information continue? There are a lot of vested interests. A number of people have said palm oil is bad, and to suddenly turn around and change their minds would be a matter of pride.

Let's look at one of the principal critics of palm oil, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, CSPI. They have not budged an inch. They're not willing to admit that the science of fatty acids now shows that not all saturated fats are created equal. Some are bad and some are good. But it's a lot easier for CSPI to lump them all together and toss the baby out with the bath water. Besides, by doing so, and getting more and more publicity, they get more subscribers for their monthly publication. The man who started CSPI is a publicity hound who knows no limits. He'll say and do anything to get on the night's television news shows and in the newspapers.

So whether it's a perfectly healthy salad dressing from Newman's Own or the wonderful margarine that I have in my own refrigerator, Smart Balance, it contains palm oil and therefore in CSPI's myopic view, it's bad and shouldn't be on the market.

This is the same organization that undermined the reputation of oat bran in 1989, using its enormous resources to saturate the news media with flawed information that oat bran did not lower cholesterol. Needless to say, they were wrong, and the value of oat bran and other foods rich in cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber has been solidly established worldwide. They're just as wrong about palm oil, and just as set on destroying it, regardless of the harm that would be done to the nation's consumers.

How far will CSPI go? Their latest attack is based on the notion that oil palm oil plantations in Malaysia are replacing habitat for tigers. They say that no new plantations should be planted on other than land already used for agriculture. Who the hell are they to tell the country of Malaysia how to govern its resources? I wonder how many birds and animals nested and thrived on the land that the CSPI offices now occupy? And the

soybeans CSPI champions grow where massive American bison herds once covered the land. Their arguments are specious, at best, and demonstrate how this monger of mythinformation will attempt to poison the minds of consumers trying to find healthy foods in their supermarkets.

I'm just one guy trying to set the record straight. Clearly, I can't do that all by myself. I don't have any such delusions of grandeur. We all need to work together to educate the public about the need for healthful food choices in general and the value of palm oil in particular.

I don't underestimate the ability of the average American consumer to learn what's best. It wasn't that long ago that the public thought all fat was bad. Now they recognize the value of the monounsaturated fats of almonds, avocados, and olive oil and the omega-3 fatty acids of the fatty cold-water fish. They can also learn that palm oil can and should play a valuable role in keeping their hearts healthy.

Not to sound like a broken record, but once again I'd like to recommend in the strongest possible terms the need for solid clinical research studies to establish once and for all the healthful properties of palm oil. Yes, there are data available. But what we need is a study done right here in the U.S., performed by a leading university, with men and women consuming a typical American diet. That type of study would be easily published in a prestigious medical journal, leading, in turn to invaluable media coverage.

To put this into perspective, look at the payoff gotten by the American dairy industry in funding research showing how those who consumed milk and other dairy foods daily were more successful in losing weight. Every woman's magazine in the country conveyed that message. And today many companies, as well as the American Dairy Association, use that research conclusion to sell its products.

Like I said earlier, I'm looking forward to the day when I can play with my grandchildren. And I'm also eager to see palm oil gain its rightful place in the American diet.

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