

The Skinny On TRANS FATS



As you may know, many restaurants have begun to phase out the use of trans fats in their menu items and replace them with zero trans fat soybean oil. But if you're like most people, you're not really sure what trans fats are and why phasing them out is a pretty big deal.

What Is Trans Fat?

Unlike other fats, the majority of trans fat is formed when liquid oils are made into solid fats like shortening and hard margarine. However, a small amount of trans fat is found naturally, primarily in some animal-based foods. Essentially, trans fat is made when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil—a process called hydrogenation. Hydrogenation increases the shelf life and flavor stability of foods containing these fats.

Trans fat, like saturated fat and dietary cholesterol, raises the LDL (or “bad”) cholesterol that increases your risk for CHD. On average, Americans consume 4 to 5 times as much saturated fat as trans fat in their diet.

Although saturated fat is the main dietary culprit that raises LDL, trans fat and dietary cholesterol also contribute significantly. Trans fat can often be found in processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils such as vegetable shortenings, some margarines (especially margarines that are harder), crackers, candies, cookies, snack foods, fried foods, and baked goods.

What's The Problem With Trans Fats?

Scientific evidence shows that consumption of saturated fat, trans fat, and dietary cholesterol raises low-density lipoprotein (LDL or “bad”) cholesterol levels that increase the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD).

But Aren't All Fats The Same?

Simply put: no. Fat is a major source of energy for the body and aids in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E, and K, and carotenoids. Both animal and plant-derived food products contain fat, and when eaten in moderation, fat is important for proper growth, development, and maintenance of good health. As a food ingredient, fat provides taste, consistency, and stability and helps us feel full. In addition, parents should be aware that fats are an especially important source of calories and nutrients for infants and toddlers (up to 2 years of age), who have the highest energy needs per unit of body weight of any age group.

Saturated and trans fats raise LDL (or “bad”) cholesterol levels in the blood, thereby increasing the risk of heart disease. Dietary cholesterol also contributes to heart disease. Unsaturated fats, such as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated, do not raise LDL cholesterol and are beneficial when consumed in moderation. Therefore, it is advisable to choose foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol as part of a healthful diet.

What Can I Do About Saturated Fat, Trans Fat, And Cholesterol?

When comparing foods, look at the Nutrition Facts panel, and choose the food with the lower amounts of saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. Health experts recommend that you keep your intake of these nutrients as low as possible while consuming a nutritionally adequate diet. However, these experts recognize that eliminating these three components entirely from your diet is not practical because they are unavoidable in ordinary diets.

How Do Your Choices Stack Up?

With the addition of trans fat to the Nutrition Facts panel, you can review your food choices and see how they stack up. The following labels illustrate total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol content per serving for butter and margarine. As you will see, the “Margarine, tub” would be your best bet when comparing the nutritional values.

Compare Spreads!*

Watch for Saturated Fat, Trans Fat and Cholesterol!

Butter**		Margarine (stick)†		Margarine (tub)†	
Nutrition Facts		Nutrition Facts		Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 Tbsp (14g) Serving Per Container 32		Serving Size 1 Tbsp (14g) Serving Per Container 32		Serving Size 1 Tbsp (14g) Serving Per Container 32	
Amount Per Serving		Amount Per Serving		Amount Per Serving	
Calories 100	Calories from Fat 100	Calories 100	Calories from Fat 100	Calories 60	Calories from Fat 60
% Daily Value*		% Daily Value*		% Daily Value*	
Total 11g	17%	Total 11g	17%	Total 7g	11%
Saturated Fat 7g	14%	Saturated Fat 2g	4%	Saturated Fat 1g	2%
Trans Fat 0g	0%	Trans Fat 3g	6%	Trans Fat 0.5g	1%
Cholesterol 30mg	60%	Cholesterol 0mg	0%	Cholesterol 0mg	0%

*Nutrient values rounded based on FDA's nutrition labeling regulations. Calorie and cholesterol content estimated.

**Butter values from FDA Table of Trans Values, 1/30/95.

† Values derived from 2002 USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 15.

The Bottom Line

Don't assume similar products are the same. Be sure to check the Nutrition Facts Panel (NFP) when comparing products because even similar foods can vary in calories, ingredients, nutrients, and the size and number of servings in the package. When buying the same brand product, also check the NFP frequently because ingredients can change at any time and any change could affect the NFP information.

Source: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/transfat.html>

