

Read That Label!

Trans Fats

They just had to make things a little more complicated. *Trans* fats were added to Nutrition Facts panels on food labels nearly three years ago, but many folks out there are still unsure about what these are, or why we should care. If you fall into this group then you've come to the right place—read on to find out why that little number next to '*trans* fat' on your label could drastically affect your food choices.

Most *trans* fats we eat are created commercially through the partial *hydrogenation* of vegetable oils. This process gives oils a longer shelf life and makes them preferable for many fried foods or baked pastries. In fact, the major food sources of *trans* fats in the U.S. are cakes, cookies, crackers, and pies. While it was previously believed that the use of these processed vegetable oils would be 'healthier' than using saturated (animal-derived) oils, it is now known that this is definitely not the case.

Current research has demonstrated that eating *trans* fats not only lowers levels of 'good' (HDL) cholesterol, but also raises levels of 'bad' (LDL) cholesterol and triglycerides. Individually these are all risk factors for heart disease. However, the association between intake of *trans* fats and heart disease is greater than can be explained by these factors alone. It seems that *trans* fats may also be affecting other risk factors for heart disease as well. Can you take one more piece of bad news? These negative effects are seen at surprisingly low intakes (only 1-3% of total energy intake).

Thankfully, legislation is slowly helping to reduce *trans* fats in the food supply. Many cities and counties across the nation have banned the use of *trans* fats in restaurants—a major source for *trans* fat intake. In July of this year California became the first state to ban *trans* fats in its restaurants. In addition, some restaurants are voluntarily removing *trans* fats from their foods nationwide. However, not all restaurants have been so accommodating. To determine if your meal will be free of *trans* fats you should ask what type of fats are being used in the preparation of your food. Anything with 'partially hydrogenated vegetable oil' on the ingredient list is going to contain some *trans* fats.

So, how much of these should you be eating? The American Heart Association recommends limiting *trans* fat intake to less than 1% of calories, meaning someone on a 2,000 calorie diet would be allowed just over 2 grams/day. While this may seem difficult to accomplish, it can be done. You can help to reduce your *trans* fat intake through careful screening of Nutrition Facts when grocery shopping. And don't forget about eating out! Make sure that your favorite restaurant has your health in mind by asking what types of fats are being used to prepare your food.