

Train off the Track

Comparing the healthfulness of trans fatty acids (TFA) to other types of fat is sort of like comparing cigarette smoking to nail biting: they're both bad habits, but one of them just might lead to an early demise.

In a recent telephone survey of consumer attitudes about nutrition, 1,000 people called at random were asked which was healthier; saturated fats or trans fatty acids. After two decades of media hype about low-fat diets, I wasn't really surprised to see that 40 percent said trans fatty acids are healthier than saturated fats.

Even so, I would have thought by now that a much larger percentage of the population might have gotten the news that an intake of trans fatty acids is only slightly healthier than your average train wreck.

A little is a lot

Trans fats are created by the hydrogenation of vegetable oil; a process that gives the oil a longer shelf life and makes it less... well, oily. These qualities also make hydrogenated vegetable oil an appealing choice for "quick service" restaurants and snack foods such as cookies, crackers, and chips. But many studies over the past decade have shown trans-fatty acids to be associated with artery damage and a high risk of heart disease.

And that's only part of what makes TFA dangerous.

In a review article published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, nutritionists at the Harvard School of Public Health wrote that trans fats inhibit the natural process by which alpha-linolenic acid is converted into EPA and DHA, the omega-3 fatty acids that are critical to so many facets of good health. And in a study of more than 800 subjects conducted at Chicago's Rush University Medical Centre, seniors who had a high trans fat intake were found to be twice as likely to suffer from Alzheimer's disease compared to those with the lowest intake.

But how high is a high intake?

Bruce Holub, a professor of nutritional sciences at Canada's University of Guelph, told the Toronto Globe and Mail that ingesting a daily gram of trans fat over several years is enough to significantly boost your risk of heart disease. And professor Holub points out that as few as two crackers can contain an entire gram of TFA.

Go figure

Last year the FDA announced that by January 2006 all Nutrition Facts panels must list trans fat content. But until then, there's a relatively simple way to figure out the TFA content of processed foods.

First check the list of ingredients. If the product contains hydrogenated oil or partially hydrogenated oil, that's obviously your first trans fat tip-off.

Next go to the Nutrition Facts panel where you'll see grams of "Total Fat" listed. Below that, the fats will be broken down into saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated fats. If the "Total Fat" number is higher than the other three combined, the difference between the two totals equals the grams-per-serving of trans fat.

Some products, however, aren't required to list monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. In that case, if the grams of "Total Fat" are higher than the grams of "Saturated Fat," it's time to go back to the list of ingredients. If "hydrogenated" appears high on the list of ingredients, you're definitely getting some trans fat. If "hydrogenated" appears lower on the list, the trans fat content is probably low.

Pop test

Let's take a look at a popular brand of "natural light" microwave popcorn. Total fat is 5 grams, saturated fat is one gram, and no other fats are listed. So with 4 fat grams unaccounted for, we check the ingredients and find only three items, in this order: popcorn, partially hydrogenated soybean oil, and salt. That's a pretty good indication that you're getting at least a gram or two of trans fat, and maybe even four.

But be sure to also check the serving size. This 3-ounce bag of popcorn claims to be 2.5 servings. So if you sit down and eat the whole bag, you might end up getting well over 4 grams of trans fat.

And because trans fat is present in so many food products, it's easy to see how you could pick up a dozen or more grams every day without even trying.

To Your Good Health,

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