

Targeting Trans Fats

Every member of the modern American food chain-providers, selectors, buyers, preparers, eaters-needs to understand how dangerous trans fats can be. The [Texas Department of Agriculture \(TDA\)](#) presents this article to provide background, suggestions and resources about trans fats.

WHAT is the problem?

Although trans fats occur naturally in some animal products like beef and dairy, synthetic trans fats are causing the public alarm. About 80 percent of the trans fats Americans consume is from sources that do not occur naturally. Synthetic trans fats are formed when hydrogen is added to a liquid vegetable oil to make it solid at room temperature. If an ingredient list includes "partially hydrogenated oil" or "vegetable shortening," it means that food contains synthetic trans fat.

Trans fats are trouble because of what they do to people's cholesterol. There are two kinds of cholesterol: LDL is the "bad," artery-clogging kind. HDL is the "good," LDL-removing kind. It is well known that saturated fat boosts harmful LDL, while unsaturated fat boosts protective HDL. We are just learning that trans fats *both* raise LDL *and* lower HDL, dramatically increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke.

WHO is doing something about it?

The first step was in 2003, when the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** passed a rule that food manufacturers must list trans fat on their nutrition labels by 2006.

In 2007, the Texas legislature passed a bill requiring **TDA** to prepare a report on trans fats. The report, due in December 2008, is to "detail all initiatives, proposals, and programs that the department and the United States Department of Agriculture are then currently conducting or planning to conduct and include the department's recommendations for legislative action to assist in reducing trans-fatty acids from school meals." Before the end of the 2007-2008 school year, TDA began collecting information from **Texas nutrition programs** about their recent bid awards and any current initiatives to curb the use of trans fats.

WHY did trans fats emerge?

Liquid oils like olive oil and sesame oil have been used in cooking since ancient times. By the end of the 19th century, less expensive food crops like soybean, corn, and peanut were also becoming popular as food oils. Before the early 20th century, the only solid shortenings for baking were butter and lard.

In the early 20th century, scientists developed a way to combine the inexpensiveness of vegetable oil with the usefulness of solid fats: hydrogenation. Vegetable shortening quickly caught on in home and commercial kitchens. It is easy to use in baked goods, lasts longer as a frying medium, and helps products stay fresher longer.

At first the appeal was its low price, but as Americans started to understand the health effects of dietary saturated fat from animal sources in the 1950s, vegetable shortening like margarine also gained ground as a supposedly healthy alternative to butter. Only in the last decade has it become clear how mistaken that belief was.

HOW can we reduce the risk?

The National Academy of Science suggests that "trans fatty acid consumption be as low as possible while consuming a nutritionally adequate diet." The American Heart Association is more specific, recommending that people eat no more than 1% of their daily calories from trans fat. That works out to about one gram of trans fat per

1,000 calories consumed. The FDA makes no recommendation at all, since there is no known safe level of trans fats in the diet.

Fried items like chips and French fries and baked goods like breads and sweets account for more than half of the trans fats in American diets. The most important step toward avoiding trans fats is to read nutrition labels. Those who make food choices for others—parents, caregivers, and meal providers—can take the extra step of insisting that food makers provide healthful alternatives to trans fats.

Here are some Web sites for more information about reducing the risk from trans fats:

[Talking about Trans fat: What You Need To Know \(USDA\)](#)

[Trans Fats \(American Heart Association\)](#)

www.squaremeals.org