

DFC Nutritional Tours

a practical  
**GUIDE**  
to avoiding  
**trans fats**

*October 2007*



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In June 2002, the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science issued a report that stated there is no safe amount of trans fat in the diet. Five years later, trans fat is still readily available in a multitude of products, only partially labeled on nutritional information panels and heavily marketed, particularly towards children. This brochure is intended to tell you what trans fat is, how and why to avoid it, and how you (and we) can influence the people who make our food to stop with the trans fat.

### **What is Trans Fat?**

By far the largest source of trans fat (sometimes referred to as trans fatty acids) in Western diets is partially hydrogenated oil used in conventional prepared foods. “Partially hydrogenated oil” is nothing more than vegetable oil that has been treated with high heat, a metal catalyst and hydrogen gas. Once the oil has been hydrogenated, it is solid at room temperature (think Crisco), has a long shelf life (think Twinkies) and is deadly (think triple bypass). Very very small amounts of naturally occurring trans fat are found in animal products. No studies have been done to examine the health effects of naturally occurring trans fat. After more than 10 years of reports (not the research, but the actual reports) the USFDA finally ruled that trans fat must be listed on nutrition facts panels by January 1, 2006. (See “0 grams\* per serving” below for more information.)

### **How Dangerous is it?**

Flat out deadly. Researchers at Harvard estimated (in 1994) that “approximately 30,000 premature coronary heart disease deaths annually could be attributable to consumption of *trans* fatty acids.” More recently the Nurses’ Health Study, an on-going Harvard study of some 80,000 nurses, found that replacing 2% of dietary trans fat with unsaturated, unhydrogenated fat (read “olive oil”) equaled a 53% reduction of the risk of coronary heart disease. Please note that the study specifically said a reduction in fat wasn’t needed for risk reduction, just replacement.

### **Where is it found?**

Primarily in conventional baked goods like cookies, crackers and breads, as well as in many candy products, prepared foods like canned soups and TV dinners, and dry mixes like instant soups and hot chocolate. As a general rule, read the ingredients on all conventional products! See “7 Nasty Surprises” for the strangest places we’ve found trans fat to date.

## **Why is it still available?**

As the late great Robert Heinlein said, if the question is why, the answer is money. Partially hydrogenated oil is a cheap way of giving prepared foods the “mouth feel” of butter or animal fat, something that we’re genetically programmed to want. It’s a very expensive proposition for a company like Betty Crocker or Quaker Oats to redevelop all their products to use a new ingredient, as well as more expensive to use real butter or chicken.

## **What are the alternatives?**

Butter, animal fats such as chicken and beef, and tropical fats such as natural palm oil are solid at room temperature and are what people used for centuries. They’re also saturated fats, making them a less healthy choice. Note, however, that moderate use of saturated fats is still considerably less dangerous – about 50% according to most studies – than trans fat.

Many recipes can be adapted to using liquid oils, which are generally mono or un-saturated. Even olive oil can be used to make a really great cake – it’s all a matter of finding the appropriate recipes.

Fractionated oil is often used as a substitute for partially hydrogenated fat. Reviews are mixed on the health effects, particularly since oil can be naturally or chemically fractionated. We recommend limiting consumption until more data is available.

Fully hydrogenated oil does not contain trans fatty acids. A number of manufacturers are working on ways to use fully hydrogenated oil in their products. No long-term studies have been done on human consumption of fully hydrogenated oil, and we recommend avoiding it until some are completed.

## **0 grams\* per serving**

While the FDA ruled that the nutrition facts panel of all foods must list the amount of Trans Fat in food, they’ve also ruled that less than .5 gram per serving may be listed as “0”. While that may be acceptable for some types of information, it seems questionable for a food that is unsafe in any amount – rather like saying something contains negligible amounts of arsenic. Better yet, some companies are taking unfair advantage of this ruling by trumpeting “**No Trans Fat** *per serving\**” on their labels. Alas, the \* doesn’t really lead you anywhere. In the case of Brummel and Brown margarine, it took a 5 minute call to the 1-800 number on the package to get someone to admit that this product **does** contain trans fat, but under ½ gram per serving. The operator kindly told me that it was

fine because I wasn't going to eat the whole tub at once, and sent me a coupon.

## **7 Nasty Surprises**

Think you can predict which products to watch out for? Not always so! Here are 7 products that we were surprised contained partially hydrogenated oil:

Krusteaz Buttermilk Pancake mix  
Betty Crocker Fruit by the Foot Fruit Leather  
Quaker Fruit and Cream Instant Oatmeal  
Jif Peanut Butter  
Lipton Onion Soup Mix  
Knorr Bouillon cubes  
Snow's Clam Chowder

## **Yet Another Great Scientific Idea?**

A few companies – Crisco, Jif and Swiss Miss among them – have chosen to develop fully hydrogenated oil rather than switching back to the (more expensive) natural fats. Fat that is fully hydrogenated does not contain trans fats. It has the consistency of plastic, which is why it wasn't used in foods in the first place. By blending fully hydrogenated oil with liquid oils, manufacturers can reach a usable texture. Very few studies have been done on fully hydrogenated oil in the human diet, and no one knows what the long term effects of eating it might be.

## **Some good products**

To end on a high note, a number of companies have been making trans fat free products for years. Some of our favorites:

Newman-O's – even more delicious than Oreos  
Spectrum Shortening – bakes just like old-fashioned vegetable shortening  
Alvarado Street Baking – great bread, no trans fat!  
Alternative Baking Company – truly yummy cookies  
Stretch Island Fruit Leather – there's no reason for trans fat in fruit leather  
Country Choice Cocoa – all the flavor, none of the trans fat  
Barbara's Bakery – Every kind of cracker you could want