

Trans Fats and Hydrogenated Oils

Many types of fats—primarily those found in commercial foods, meats and dairy products--can raise the artery-clogging cholesterol and put you at risk for heart disease.

Trans fat is considered the biggest threat, according to the Mayo Clinic. Here is what you need to know to reduce your consumption of trans fats and other harmful fats.

What are trans fats?

Trans fat, also referred to as trans fatty acids, are made when food manufacturers add vegetable oil through a process called hydrogenation. Hydrogenation increases the shelf life and the flavor stability of foods. It's believed that adding hydrogen to the oil makes the oil more difficult to digest and, in the body, it acts very much like saturated fat—another fat known to raise artery-clogging cholesterol.

While many manufacturers have reduced their use of trans fatty acids in commercial products, if the label notes “partially hydrogenated” or just “hydrogenated,” it means it contains trans fatty acids. (Ironically, “fully hydrogenated” oil does not produce trans fatty acids. It's the “partially” hydrogenated that is harmful).



What foods contain trans fatty acids?

Trans fatty acids are said to be present in close to 42,000 food products. Trans fat is found in the following foods: vegetable shortenings, some margarines, crackers, cookies, some baked goods, pastries, snack foods, chips, most candy and other foods made with or fried in “hydrogenated” and “partially hydrogenated” oils. In addition, a small amount of trans fat is found naturally in some animal-based foods.

How can you tell if a food product contains trans fat?

As of January 2006, the FDA requires food manufacturers to list trans fat on all products being distributed and sold in the USA. Trans fats are listed directly under saturated fat on product nutrition labels. If the ingredients of a product contain the words partially hydrogenated or hydrogenated this is an indicator that the product contains trans fat.

As of 2010, even fast food restaurants now have to post nutritional information for their food. This makes it easier for customers to recognize and see how much trans fat is in the food they are eating. In 2010, California became the first state to ban the use of cooking with trans fat in restaurants. Hopefully more states will follow this trend!

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There's fat in both butter and margarine. What's the healthier choice?

In a sense, it's like trying to choose between the lesser of two evils. Butter is made from animal-based fat, is high in both cholesterol and saturated fat and poses a danger to your heart. Butter also contains some trans fats. All put together, butter raises the potential for causing blocked arteries.

In contrast, the majority of margarines are made from vegetable fat. They do not contain cholesterol, but when they were first introduced, most margarines were loaded with trans fat. However, in recent years, a new type of non-hydrogenated margarine has become widely available. This type of margarine is softer than solid stick margarine and does not contain any trans fats.

So to answer the question: unless you're sure that the margarine is non-hydrogenated, it's better to limit both butter and margarine.

Tips to Avoid Eating Trans Fatty Acids

- Choose a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, low and/or nonfat dairy products, whole-grains and high-fiber foods.
- Limit the following foods that most often contain trans fat: French fries, doughnuts, cookies, crackers, chips, muffins, pies, cakes, and cake frostings.
- Wherever possible, use non-hydrogenated vegetable oils that occur naturally such as: canola, safflower, sunflower and olive oil.
- Cook with unsaturated vegetable oils instead of margarine or shortening that contain trans fat.
- Choose non-hydrogenated soft margarines (the liquid or tub varieties are best because the more liquid it contains the less it's been hydrogenated and the less trans fat it contains)
- Reduce eating out at restaurants, where foods tend to be made with hydrogenation and contain trans fat.
- Limit your intake of fried foods from fast food restaurants. Some examples are: chicken wings and tenders, French fries and batter-dipped items.



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