

Trans-Formed My Diet

How hard is it to eliminate this hidden fat? Our reporter tried.

by Amy O'Connor

Until recently, trans fats fell into a broad category of things that I knew weren't healthy but ate anyway, because, well, I'm busy paying bills and trying to keep my toddler from flinging the cat off the terrace. Besides, how much damage could a little man-made fat do?

Plenty, according to Jeffrey Aron, MD, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. "Emerging data strongly suggests that cancer and dementia are made worse by trans fats," he told me. "Putting trans fats into your body is like dropping fine grains of sand into a Swiss watch. Eventually, the system shuts down." Yikes. My body may run more like a Timex than a Rolex, but I still want to keep it ticking for as long as possible.

The Trouble with Trans

Ironically, nutritionists used to think trans fats were the healthy alternative to saturated fat, but that was before the evidence against them started piling up. In the 1990s, at least six major studies found that trans fats raised the ratio of "bad" LDL cholesterol to "good" HDL cholesterol; other research has found that trans fats can raise triglycerides, another risk factor for heart disease.

Three large investigations--the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, the Nurses' Health Study, and the Alpha-Tocopherol Beta-Carotene Cancer Prevention Trial--strengthened the link between heart attacks and trans fats. Researchers suggest a reason: Trans fats trigger widespread systemic inflammation.

Currently, the USDA advises that we simply watch our intake (daily consumption is about 5.8 g). But the accumulating anti-trans research has led some public health groups to suggest tighter limits. The American Heart Association, for one, recommends reducing your intake to less than 1% of daily calories, or about 2 g. And the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, DC, nutrition-policy advocacy group, urges a zero-tolerance policy. As CSPI head Michael F. Jacobson, PhD, explains, "Trans fats account for as many as 50,000 deaths a year." When I heard that, I vowed to ban them from my household.

Unfortunately, that wasn't as easy as I'd originally hoped, because trans fats are found almost everywhere a busy mom might look. They're usually created when vegetable oil is hydrogenated--altered with hydrogen--to make it solid at room temperature (think oil versus margarine). That solidity helps make potato chips crunchy and piecrusts tender. It also makes food more shelf stable, which means if a food is boxed or wrapped and sold in a grocery store, there's a good chance trans fats are lurking inside. So I called in the nutrition experts to help me navigate three square meals. Here are the lessons I learned along the way to trans-freedom.

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Lesson 1: Labels Don't Tell You Everything

Since last January, federal law has mandated that all Nutrition Facts labels list trans fats under the line item for saturated fat. Simply by checking labels at the supermarket, I discovered that some of my favorite treats are now trans-free.

But when I check in with Jacobson, he's not impressed. That's because some of the foods labeled trans-fat free aren't. "That packaging can be deceptive," he says. "When it says 0 g trans fat, by law it can contain up to half a gram per serving." A few servings a day, and you could find yourself in dangerous trans-land.

Still, it is possible to shop smart. Stores like Whole Foods and Wild Oats Markets have instituted a total ban. Otherwise, scrutinize the ingredients list; the words hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated are the number one tip-off that trans fats are present. Finally, search out USDA-certified organic products; the process of hydrogenation is forbidden under current organics regulations.

Lesson 2: Even Healthy Foods Have Some Trans

Pizza, pancakes, and potpie form the pyramid that is my 18-month-old's diet. I found trans fats in every one. I replaced the pies and pancake mix with trans-free alternatives--Amy's Vegetable Pot Pie and Bisquick Heart Smart--and swapped the frozen pizzas with safer picks from Healthy Choice.

Then Aron and Jacobson tell me that negligible amounts of trans fats occur naturally in meat and milk. The catch: My husband will move out if I make him become a vegan. Since these tiny levels pose no harm, according to experts, we're going to live with natural trans.

Lesson 3: Menus Are Minefields

There's no law that says restaurants, delis, or coffee shops have to reveal their ingredients, so finding the trans fats on a menu is nearly impossible. But they're there; restaurants generally use them because they're more stable than other cooking oils.

Many popular chains, including Au Bon Pain, Panera Bread, California Pizza Kitchen, and Wendy's, to their credit have switched to healthier oils; those that haven't--such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and Burger King--offer complete nutritional information online. (That's where I learn that my favorite Starbucks pumpkin scone weighs in with a whopping 6 g of trans fats. Thankfully, the equally tasty raspberry scone is trans free.) To further protect diners, some local governments, such as in New York City (where I live), have moved to institute bans.

One night, when placing a take-out order, I'm thrilled to hear that the local barbecue joint has jumped on the no-trans bandwagon. The feast arrives, and I settle in with a big ol' plate of cole slaw, tangy baked beans, and delightfully greasy short ribs. No trans--but lots of finger-lickin' saturated fat. Oh well, that's another article.