

Why Do the New USDA/HHS Dietary Guidelines Soft-Pedal the Dangers of Artificial Trans Fats?

The New Recommendations Don't Distinguish Healthy Natural Trans Fats from Toxic Manufactured Trans Fats -- And That's a Problem

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In the wake of the latest [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), it now appears that the new federal recommendations don't provide guidance enough.

While I recognize the challenges in creating comprehensive dietary recommendations for the nation's diverse population, the new suggestions from USDA/HHS are at times confusing – even to the point of conveying contradictory messages or soft-pedaling some very risky elements of the American diet. Even more troubling, the USDA and HHS continue to declare that lower saturated fat intake must happen, when in fact the data does not support that position.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM), a division of the [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#), recommends that total fat make up 20-35 percent of daily energy needs. For decades, we've been told to cut saturated fat consumption to prevent heart disease. As a nation, we've responded by reducing red meat consumption and increasing carbohydrate consumption. Lo and behold, as eating patterns have shifted, Americans have experienced a [sustained increase in obesity rates](#).

As researchers sought to determine why this was so, more evidence emerged that saturated fat is not clearly linked to heart disease. In 2010, [a meta-analysis of 21 studies](#) concluded, "there is no significant evidence for concluding that dietary saturated fat is associated with an increased risk of CHD or CVD." Four years later, [a 204 meta-analysis of 32 separate studies](#) prompted researchers to write, "Current evidence does not clearly support cardiovascular guidelines that encourage high consumption of polyunsaturated fatty acids and low consumption of total saturated fats."

The role of trans fats in this discussion cannot be overemphasized. Because trans fats have been linked to an increased risk of heart disease, the Institute of Medicine recommends a trans fat intake as low as possible. But not all trans fats are the same, and the new guidelines don't go nearly far enough in making that clear.

Naturally occurring trans fats – that is, fats found in foods derived from animals – are considered safe. These are sometimes – no, make that often -- confused with *manufactured* trans fats that are created by adding hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils to make them more solid, often dubbed "artificial trans fats." In June 2015, the FDA determined that partially hydrogenated oils are no longer Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) in human food, and need to be removed from processed foods by 2018.

Because it's vital for consumers to understand the difference between natural and artificial trans fats, I believe the USDA/HHS guidelines missed a huge opportunity to drive that point home. It's truly a puzzlement. After all, what is left of the constituency for artificial trans fats, in the wake of the FDA's determination last June? Ambivalence and confusion are, in their own way, every bit as toxic as the substances the FDA has agreed to phase out. Are the FDA, HHS and USDA not on the same page?

And it appears that consumers aren't on any page. Working with Ipsos Research, we at Coast Packing recently commissioned a survey of 1,000 Americans on this very subject. The clear takeaway was that many consumers remain confused about trans fats in their diet. Indeed, there's a lack of understanding about trans fats among almost two-thirds of American adults: 64 percent either think that all trans fats are unhealthy (36 percent) or don't know about the health aspects of trans fats in foods at all (28 percent).

While almost five times as many respondents know that artificial trans fats in foods are unhealthy while natural trans fats are neutral to healthy (24 percent) -- compared to 5 percent who incorrectly think that natural trans fats are unhealthy and artificial trans fats are neutral to healthy -- the vast majority simply aren't aware that there are different kinds of trans fats and that not all trans fats are toxic.

I'm a firm believer in natural, minimally processed food. Consumers are wise to avoid industrially-produced partially hydrogenated fats in favor of animal fat-based ingredients, which have the benefit of being consistently delicious and, in moderation, actually promoting health. One would hope that the government's watchdogs would watch a bit more closely.

Actually, perhaps more than a bit. Anyone for a do-over?

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