FACTS
Taking the Trans Fat Out
Banning Trans fats in Schools, Workplaces, and Restaurants

OVERVIEW

Until fairly recently, few Americans had ever heard of “trans fat” – found mostly in foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, like cookies, cakes, or fried foods. Until January 2006, it was not listed on the “Nutrition Facts” panel for manufactured foods and is still not found on fast food menu boards or restaurant menus. There are many consumers who still do not know the increased health risks associated with trans fats, including coronary heart disease and diabetes.¹

Researchers have made a definitive link between specific types of dietary fat, including trans fat, and cardiovascular disease (CVD). A recent study showed that women with the highest levels of trans fats in their blood were associated with a three times higher risk of having coronary heart disease (CHD) than those women with the lowest levels.²

- Trans fats tend to raise the levels of low-density lipoproteins (“bad cholesterol”) and lower the levels of “good cholesterol” in the body.³
- They also can cause inflammation and atherosclerotic lesions and interfere with the metabolism of other important, healthy fats.⁴,⁵

Public health experts believe that eliminating trans fatty acids from the food supply through public policy approaches is one of the most effective strategies to rapidly improve cardiovascular health.⁶ Policies include robust nutrition standards in schools, menu labeling in restaurants, trans fat bans in restaurants, robust standards for foods marketed and advertised to children, and strong procurement policies for foods purchased in government feeding programs and workplaces.

TRANS FAT BASICS

Trans fat or trans fatty acids arise during the chemical process known as partial hydrogenation of oils. It makes liquid cooking oils into stable semi-solids, such as vegetable shortening, and helps increase shelf life. Partially hydrogenated oils give foods like baked goods and French fries a desired feel and texture. A small amount of trans fats, along with saturated fat, occurs naturally in some animal foods, such as milk and beef.

Ironically, partially hydrogenated oils were once touted as healthy, cheap replacements for animal fats and tropical oils high in saturated fats, such as butter, lard, and palm oil. But, research has shown that trans fat increases the risk of developing CHD.

Both saturated and trans fats are bad for heart health and should be replaced with mono- or polyunsaturated fat in order to reduce CVD risk. Recent studies show that healthy oils may be important for heart disease prevention.⁷ However, it is difficult to avoid “bad fats” altogether. The AHA recommends that saturated fat be less than 7 percent of total calories and trans fat less than 1 percent of total calories.³

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Since the FDA mandated trans fat labelling on packaged foods in 2006 and consumers began demanding foods without these heart-clogging fats, industry has moved rapidly to find alternative oils and take trans fat out of the food supply. Even government feeding programs have fewer trans fats. The US Department of Agriculture, for example, has been working hard to remove all of the trans fats from commodity foods offered in school meal programs, eliminating the fats from frozen potato products and disallowing shortening and butter as an ordering option. From their commodity list of 180 food items, only a few items still contain small amounts of trans fats and those are naturally-occurring. Use of trans fats in fast-food restaurants has essentially been eliminated.⁸ Indications are
that over 50% of trans fats have been removed from the food supply. However, the AHA is concerned that oils high in saturated fat, such as palm oil, are replacing partially hydrogenated oils in many manufactured food products to avoid trans fats being listed on the label. Data from USDA show that palm oil imports into the U.S. during the 2005/06 marketing year increased by 72% from the previous year.\(^9\)

Many states and localities have passed trans fat bans. Tiburon, CA became the first city in the U.S. where all restaurants voluntarily cooked with trans-fat free oils. A full statewide ban on their use in California followed, and became law on January 1, 2010. Other US cities that have passed bans include New York and Philadelphia, as well as some European countries, such as Denmark and Switzerland.\(^5\) The UK Faculty of Public Health and Royal Society for Public Health have called for the elimination of trans fat in that country by 2011 and estimate that this could prevent 11,000 heart attacks and 7,000 deaths each year.\(^6\)

### REAL WORLD CONCERNS

The AHA supports regulatory and legislative efforts at state and local levels to reduce trans fat in the food we eat. The Association applauds such a heart-healthy approach to a major CVD problem.

To assure that there is replacement with healthy options and not oils high in saturated fat, the AHA supports a phased-in approach with regulatory safeguards that provide policy-makers flexibility in implementation and strong programmatic efforts to assist industry in the transition.

### SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Trait-enhanced oils, such as low-linolenic soybean oil and high-oleic canola and sunflower oils, are some of the best available trans fat alternatives. It will be a challenge to produce enough of these oils to replace the 9 billion lbs. of trans fat-laden oils used annually, but industry is making progress.\(^10\) Current data indicate that about half of the replacement supply is available to replace trans fat from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, and many healthy oils remain in development.\(^7\) This situation is complicated by another factor: new incentives to plant crops for bio-fuels, such as corn for ethanol. Acreage that could have been used for trait-enhanced oil seeds may now be put to such purposes, particularly if farmers can make a much higher profit by growing commodity soybean and corn for alternative fuels.

The implications are clear. Even as demand rises, supply could decline, resulting in higher prices for healthy oils. Without an adequate and affordable supply of healthy oils, restaurants and food manufacturers may be forced to go back to using oils rich in saturated fats.\(^8,11\) Unfortunately, any health benefits gained from removing trans fat will be significantly undermined as a result of this trend. Therefore, the AHA supports efforts to remove trans fats and to provide an adequate and affordable supply of alternative healthy oils despite the reality that they may cost more than saturated fat alternatives.

### THE AHA ADVOCATES

The AHA will continue to monitor removal of trans fats from the food supply and assure that healthy replacement oils are used.

- The Association will advocate for legislation and regulation that removes industrially-produced trans fats from food preparation in restaurants and schools and requires that all foods brought in be zero grams of industrially-produced trans fat as labeled.
- The AHA will also address labeling issues to assure that there is accurate information provided to consumers about the actual amounts of trans fats in foods products.
- The AHA will support robust nutrition standards in schools and for foods marketed and advertised to children and strong procurement standards for foods purchased by employers and government feeding programs.

### References: