

Trans fats: The move away from bad fats

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[CBC News](#)

The anti-trans-fat bandwagon has been rolling across Canada since the fall of 2003, when Ontario cookie-maker Voortman Cookies announced it would rid its products of the unhealthy compound. The company's owner says his daughter — a naturopath — played a big role in convincing him to make a healthier cookie.

On Dec. 5, 2006, New York City's board of health approved a ban on trans fats in all restaurants across the city. The ban took effect in June 2008. A month later, the city's restaurants were further required to post calorie counts on menu boards in the same font size as the price or face fines of up to \$2,000 US.

In March 2003, Denmark became the first country to pass legislation strictly regulating the sale of foods containing trans fats. No more than two per cent of the fats and oils in any food product can contain trans fats. The legislation effectively limits people's trans fat intake to less than one gram per day.

Switzerland followed Denmark's lead in April 2008 with similarly strict limits on trans fats.

In Canada, the House of Commons was considering similar legislation in February 2004, but it died three months later when Parliament was dissolved and an election called.

Since then, new labelling laws have come into effect and a growing list of companies have made snack products trans-fat free.

In June 2006, the federal Trans Fat Task Force recommended legislation to limit trans fats in processed foods. The task force — a partnership between Health Canada and the Heart and Stroke Foundation — called for a trans fat limit of two per cent of total fat content in spreadable margarine and five per cent in all other foods.

Ten months later, a report by the Heart and Stroke Foundation and Toronto Public Health called for the federal government to act immediately on the task force's recommendations and eliminate harmful trans fat from Canada's food supply.

"Trans fats are not a choice, they're a killer," said Sally Brown, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

A survey released in conjunction with the foundation's report showed many restaurants, food manufacturers and retailers are making progress, but trans fats are still prevalent in many foods, including those consumed by children.

In June 2009, the foundation renewed its calls for more stringent legislation.

"We have seen real leaders in industry that have removed the trans fats from their products," said Stephen Samis, director of health policy for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. "And we've seen others that can't be bothered."

The foundation estimates people who consume large amounts of trans fats are three times more likely to suffer heart disease.

Calgary in 2008 became the first Canadian city to require restaurants to cut their trans fats. Under the bylaw, cooking oils and margarines used in restaurants could contain no more than two per cent trans fats.

The Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association called Calgary's plan flawed, saying it supported a move for a national trans-fat ban by 2010.

Toronto is also taking its own initiatives. David McKeown, Toronto's medical officer of health, urged the federal government to implement the recommendations as soon as possible, while saying he would start work on the local level.

"In the interim, we will work with various city-run facilities such as child-care centres and cafeterias, as well as school boards, to request that they voluntarily reduce trans fat in foods prepared, served and sold on site," McKeown said in a release.

In June 2007, Federal Health Minister Tony Clement asked food companies to voluntarily reduce trans fats in their products. But if the industry does not make "significant progress" in cutting the fats, Clement said the federal government would create national limits by 2009.

The Trans Fat Task Force [reported on July 21, 2008](#), that while many fast-food restaurants have eliminated trans fats, many soft margarine producers have resisted change. It also said pastries and doughnuts continue to contain high levels of trans fats.

On Nov. 24, 2008, Girl Guides of Canada announced that they had finally found a way to reduce the amount of trans fats in their popular chocolate- and vanilla-flavoured cookies. The new cookies — which will contain 90 per cent less trans fat than the old cookies — will be available in the spring of 2009. The organization has been raising money through cookie sales for 81 years. The cookies are made by Dare, which has offered other trans fat-free cookies for several years.

What is trans fat?

Trans fat is derived from a chemical process known as "partial hydrogenation." That's the process of converting liquid oils to a semi-solid form. It's what allowed you to take those early tubs of margarine out of the fridge and spread it on your toast without ripping it apart, like you would with straight-from-the-fridge butter.

Most spreadable margarines now have eliminated trans fats. Manufacturers have done away with the hydrogenation process, achieving spreadable margarines by adding modified palm and palm kernel oil.

Food companies favoured trans fats because they allowed their products to stay fresh on the shelves longer. And they're made from less expensive oils, keeping production costs down.

Why is it bad for me?

Trans fats raise the low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad" cholesterol, in the body. While saturated fats — found in butter, cheese, beef, and coconut and palm oil — raise cholesterol levels, trans fats go further. They also deplete good cholesterol (HDL), which helps protect against heart disease. The body is unable to break down trans fatty acids, causing them to build up in the body.

In other words, much like bacon grease clogging up the kitchen pipes, trans fats contribute to clogging the arteries leading to the heart and brain.

But don't I need some fat in my diet?

Absolutely. The Heart and Stroke Foundation recommends that 20 to 35 per cent of the calories you consume should come from fat. That's 45 to 75 grams of fat for the average woman on a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet. For the average man on a 2,500-calorie-a-day diet, it's 60 to 105 grams of fat.

Every day, Canadians consume an average of 10 grams of trans fats. That may not sound like much — but a gram of trans fat is said to be 10 times harder on your body than a gram of saturated fat.

Trans fats also occur naturally in some animal-based foods such as butter, milk products, cheese, beef and lamb.

How can you tell if it's in food?

Look at the label. If it says "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" then there are probably trans fats in the product. Canada was the first country to require nutritional labeling with trans fats listed.

As of Dec. 12, 2005, the food industry was required to comply with the regulations, while small businesses with less than \$1 million in annual sales were given two more years to comply with the label law.

Products that are exempt from the labeling regulations include:

- Alcohol.

- Fresh fruit and vegetables.

- Raw meat and poultry (except if it's ground).

- Raw fish and seafood.

- Foods sold in retail places where they are prepared and processed (e.g., a bakery).

- Individual servings of food intended to be eaten immediately (e.g., fast food).

Trans fats exist in processed foods but some foods can contain an inordinate amount of trans fats, depending on the ingredients used:

- Spreads. Hard margarine is loaded with trans and saturated fats. Other non-butter spreads and shortening may also contain high amounts.

- Packaged foods, especially cake and pancake mixes.

- Instant soups and noodle kits.

- Fast foods such as french fries and fried chicken.

- Frozen food. Pies, waffles, pizzas and breaded fish should be looked at closely.

- Baked goods. Doughnuts, muffins, cakes, etc.

- Crackers. Shortening provides the crispy texture.

- Breakfast food. Breakfast cereal and energy bars are highly processed.

- Cookies and candy.

- Toppings and dips. Non-dairy creamers and flavoured coffees, whipped toppings, gravy mixes and salad dressing are loaded with trans fats.

If you want to minimize your trans fat intake, be sure to read the nutrition information label.

Should I cut down my intake of trans fats?

Only if you're taking in more than you should. Some experts recommend that a maximum of 10 per cent of the total calories consumed should be "bad" fats. North Americans tend to eat up to five times the recommended daily allowance of such fats.

The American Heart Association released even stricter guidelines in June 2006 recommending that just one per cent of a person's total calories should be from trans fats. For a person who eats 2,000 calories per day, that's just two trans fat grams daily, or about half a small bag of french fries.

What can I do?

Besides reading the labels on packages, you can:

- Use liquid vegetable oils when you cook: canola, corn, olive, safflower and sunflower oils (not always possible, especially when you're looking for something to spread on your morning toast).

- Increase your intake of natural foods such as vegetables, fruit, chicken, fish, turkey, beans.

How about when I eat out? Here are some tips to keep in mind when ordering:

- Axe the appetizers: Chicken wings, cheese sticks and other such items are often crammed with trans fats.

- Avoid foods that are fried in shortening or margarine.

- Consider how the meal is prepared: Chicken is healthy on its own but when it's fried or put in pastry, it's a trans-fat nightmare.

- Be careful with the sweet stuff: Anything with pastry may contain trans fats — depending on the ingredients used. That can include things made with dough — cinnamon buns, pie crust, baklava, croissants, etc.

What can I eat, then?

If you go to a deli, consider the turkey sandwich or, if you're at a seafood restaurant choose the broiled fish. Grilled chicken is always a good choice and low-fat Chinese dishes such as stir-fried vegetables are good.

The list of companies removing or reducing trans fat levels is growing. Burlington, Ont.-based Voortman Cookies reached its goal of changing its recipes to get rid of trans fat on April 5, 2004, becoming the first major cookie-maker to offer trans-fat-free cookies.

The Kellogg Company has eliminated trans fats from its breakfast cereals and Kraft avoided a lawsuit in California by ridding its popular Oreo cookies of trans fats.

McCain has promoted its Superfries as "trans-fat free" while PepsiCo has marketed its Frito-Lay chips, Ruffles, Doritos and Cheetos in the same way.

The Trans Fat Task Force cited Burger King as one fast-food chain that made significant improvements in trans fat levels between December 2007 and June 2008.

Under Canadian law, products can be considered free of trans fats if they contain no more than 0.5 grams per serving.