

November 2006

FACT SHEET

TRANS FATS

What are trans fats?

Trans fats (or trans fatty acids) are a type of fat in foods. Although they are chemically classified as unsaturated fats, they have a different chemical structure to polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats and behave more like the saturated or 'bad' fats in our bodies.

Where are trans fats found?

Trans fats in our diets may be naturally occurring or created during food processing. There is a small amount of trans fats found in nature – primarily from butter, milk, fatty meats and other animal-based foods. However, the majority of the trans fats in our diets come from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils – liquid oils which have been processed to turn them into a solid spread. This process is called hydrogenation and is important to give oils useful functional properties, such as chemical stability for frying, suitability for use in making cakes, biscuits and pastries and for the spreadability of margarines.

How do trans fats affect health?

Scientific evidence shows that the consumption of saturated fats, trans fats and dietary cholesterol increases LDL-cholesterol levels. LDL-cholesterol is referred to as the "bad" cholesterol because a high level of it in the blood increases the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Trans fats are now being recognised as being even more harmful to heart health than saturated fats as they not only increase LDL-cholesterol but decreases the protective effects of HDL- 'good' cholesterol in the

body, which combined has a potent effect on increasing the risk of developing CVD. According to the Heart Foundation of Australia, heart disease is the largest single cause of death in Australia¹. It is therefore important to reduce the amounts of saturated fats, trans fats and cholesterol in our diets.

Trans Fats and Labelling

Many countries, including the United States, Canada and some European countries, have either placed limits on the permissions for trans fats in processed foods or more, commonly, mandated labelling requirements for trans fats in foods. For example, in the United States, manufacturers can make a 'Trans Free' claim, if the product contains less than 0.5g of trans fats per 100g of product.

Currently, in Australia and New Zealand, the trans fats in foods only have to be labelled if there is a nutrition claim about cholesterol or fat in the product. However, voluntary labelling is permitted and many oil and margarine manufacturers have chosen to voluntarily label their products.

As Australia and New Zealand's largest supplier of edible oils, Goodman Fielder has taken the lead in trans fats labelling – adopting the claim 'Virtually Free of Trans Fatty Acids' when a product contains less than 1.0g of trans fats per 100g of product.

How can I minimise the amount of trans fats in my diet?

Some food manufacturers now list trans fats in the nutrition information panel. Identifying the amount of saturated fats, trans fats and cholesterol on food labels gives you the information you need to make food choices that help reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Most table margarines and spreads available in Australia are now virtually free of trans fats – check the label.

References

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2002. Australia's Health 2002. Canberra: AIHW.