

# Eliminating Transfats from Food

*Benjamin Scoblionko*

As America's economic problems continue to grow, so too do our waistlines. In 2009, almost two thirds of United States residents were overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup> As families look for inexpensive alternatives to weather tough times, they turn to fast food and cheap candy bars for dinner and snacks to fill the void in their stomachs and bank accounts. Many of these fast food chains, candy and cookie companies, such as Wendy's®, Lays®, and Kraft®, have started following the growing desire of Americans to line our grocery store shelves with healthier options by eliminating transfats in many of their products.<sup>4</sup> Transfats are fatty acids that undergo industrial processing that adds hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils.<sup>6</sup> This process, known as hydrogenation, increases saturation, melting point and shelf life, which makes these oils very attractive products to cook with.

The problem with this is that, unlike natural fats, transfats are not essential; they lower HDL cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease. One would think that because of the reasons previously stated, the use of transfat containing oils would be banned, but that is not the case. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the association that advises both the United States and Canadian governments, concluded that there is "no adequate level, recommended daily amount or tolerable upper limit for trans fats. This is because any incremental increase in transfat intake increases the risk of coronary heart disease."<sup>5</sup> In spite of this conclusion, the NAS has yet to recommend the elimination of transfats from daily diets.

Transfats are very popular and are widely used because their impact on melting point and shelf life. These small benefits come at a huge cost for the American population. Last year, obesity-related diseases cost an estimated \$147 billion.<sup>2</sup> Obesity rates did not decrease in a single state in the US in 2009.<sup>3</sup> These staggering statistics show the impact unhealthy food, and specifically transfats, is having on our hearts and checkbooks. One way to reduce this problem would be banning the use of unnaturally occurring transfats (some transfats, known as vaccenic acids, naturally occur in trace amounts in meat, but do not have the same negative effects). The current laws allow food corporations to advertise products that contain less than half a gram of transfats as having zero grams of transfats. This is not transfat free and is only misleading Americans. Although many of the major food production companies are leading by example by switching to trans-fat free oils, there is still much progress to be made.

Organizations, such as "Bantransfats.com," have led the charge facilitating the elimination of transfats by bringing the problem into mainstream media. Following the Bantransfat.com vs. Kraft® law suit in 2003, Kraft eliminated trans fats from over six hundred products, including Oreos®.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as a result of the law suit, the FDA labeling rule was passed, requiring transfats to be listed on all food labels. Although cases such

as this one have helped to initiate awareness of the dangers of transfats, the problem continues largely to be ignored by the government. The only way to eliminate the negative effects of transfat is to completely eliminate the use of unnaturally occurring transfats.

Walter Willet, from the Harvard School of Public Health, has been pushing for the much needed reform. Willet spoke to a group of food manufacturing companies and professions advocating that, "Human life is more important than shelf life."<sup>7</sup> The movement towards a transfat-free America Willet desires has been a slow process because of the simple fact that most Americans do not understand what transfats are and how they affect the body. An important step that has helped publicize the nutritional distinctions among different types of fats came with the well-advertised New York City restaurant ban.<sup>7</sup> This was an important step in the right direction, influencing legislation in other major cities, such as Boston where transfats were banned in 2008.

As cities such as Boston and New York City lead the way, the understanding about the toxic effects of transfats continues to grow. In recent years, strides have been made in the right direction, but there is still room for improvement. Health curriculums must continue to follow the example set by New York City and emphasize the importance of healthy eating and the elimination of transfats. The obesity problem in America has turned into an epidemic that, in recent years, has spiraled out of control. A national ban on transfats would not only start the much needed transition to a healthier America, but should help reduce obesity costs.

## References

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**Author Contact:** B.S. New York University, 2010. Address correspondence to B.S. at [brs297@nyu.edu](mailto:brs297@nyu.edu)