

Blaming Trans Fats For Developing World Health Problems Is Like Blaming A Spoon



By Hank Campbell — May 16, 2018



The head of the World Health Organization claims that trans fats - which are in things like margarine and donuts - are responsible for 500,000 deaths each year [and WHO wants them eliminated from the global food supply by 2023](#) ^[1]. This is a dramatic flip-flop from the time when partially-hydrogenated vegetable oil in margarine was saving us from butter and meat fat, which were also linked to cardiovascular disease.

What changed? Not much, which makes their new REPLACE initiative (an acronym with six action items; leave it to the UN to make a seven letter acronym from six things) directed at elimination of "industrially-produced" trans fats look like it is the UN taking a decade too long to do something. And then not caring what the data show. And we have data if they want to look at it. New York City first created "trans-fat-phobia" in 2006, thanks to then-Health Commissioner Dr. Tom Frieden ("New Yorkers are consuming a hazardous, artificial substance without their knowledge or consent" was his scaremongering in the *New York Times*), who would join the Obama administration in 2009 and set out to ban lots of other things. The operative term is "industrially-produced" trans fats. What is the distinction? Not much, to our bodies, fats are 9 calories per gram regardless of whether it is natural trans fats (in beef, lamb, and dairy products), or partially hydrogenated cooking oils. In America, trans fats account for about 1 percent of our food intake, compared to 3% in the 1990s. It was higher through the 1990s because previous self-proclaimed experts insisted plant-based oils were heart healthier than saturated fats. (1)

After being touted as a miracle for saving us from cardiovascular disease brought on by meat it was instead found that trans fats can raise low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL), the so-called "bad cholesterol," more than the saturated fats we were told were too unhealthy and the reason we needed vegetable oil. Trans fats may also reduce levels of HDL, the "good" cholesterol.

Improper LDL and HDL levels led to, you guessed it, cardiovascular disease and death.

What can't be linked to cardiovascular disease when all you need is to give people a few dozen food choices, and then look at how many had cardiovascular disease? If I flip a coin 70 times, I am almost certain to get tails 5 times in a row. So I have a p-value of .05. That is what bad epidemiology does.

The War On Triscuits

There is just one glaring problem for the U.N. body using these claims about trans fats. [The entire "cholesterol hypothesis" has been cast into doubt](#) [2]. In that BMJ paper, data collected from 19 studies on a total of 68,094 older adults found that almost 80 percent of the participants in the studies who had high LDL cholesterol did not die because of their cholesterol level. It was not a clinically relevant metric.

I don't care about trans fats (and despite nonsensical claims anti-science activists like lawyers at Sourcewatch or CSPI will make, I am not funded by Big Trans Fat, whoever that is), I eat so few donuts that they are meaningless to my diet, but this kind of 'science of the week' flip-flopping casts a lot of other science into doubt. Why believe anyone about smoking if every few years fat changes sides? Yet this keeps happening, thanks to centralized institutions that need to say something to remain relevant and justify their membership dues. For example, 18 years ago, using statistics just as suspect as those on trans fats, the American Academy of Pediatrics told new parents that peanut butter must be avoided for babies. Because peanuts *caused* peanut allergies. What happened to peanut allergies? They went up. Last year the American Academy of Pediatrics said to give kids peanut butter early because it will *prevent* the allergy.

That is epidemiological fad chasing, not evidence-based decision-making.

This doesn't help the developing world, it harms them

New York City, with almost 3% of the national population, has a good dataset because it was first to create bans on trans fats in 2006. Did we get the 25 percent reduction in risk of heart by lowering daily consumption of trans fats to under 5 grams Dr. Frieden told us would happen after his ban? No, because it is risk, not actual events.(2) How can you measure if someone's risk went down? Cardiovascular disease did not go down, obesity and diabetes instead went up. Did we prevent 200 heart attacks nationwide? No.

It's fine to ban this stuff in the U.S. Like with BPA, even if the science says something is harmless, companies will cave in to public pressure and remove it, and that has happened with trans fats here. Yet WHO, Bloomberg Philanthropies and Resolve to Save Lives feel a need to do something with their money, so they are claiming that if they can get rid of partially hydrogenated cooking oils In North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia they will save *500,000 lives* per year. (3)

We are in "Spinal Tap" land here. (4) They have turned their amp all the way up to 11 despite the reality that in the US, with 326 million people, we can't even show 200 lives have been saved.

Who runs Resolve To Save Lives? Dr. Tom Frieden, who banned trans fats in New York City and therefore knows better than anyone that it made no meaningful difference in health outcomes. And

media are again trotting out Walter Willett, from Harvard TS Chan School of Public Health, who has been leading this epidemiological war on food for decades. (5)

We have a worldwide food waste problem, and we have a problem in developing countries where food costs too much already. Trace levels of trans fats increase shelf life, they reduce food waste by reducing spoilage compared to other fats. We want to have poor countries adding more food to landfills?

It's too much fried and baked food in those regions, too much smoking, too much of lots of things and inadequate medical care that give them poor health. Blaming trace levels of trans fats for that is as ridiculous as blaming the forks.

NOTES:

(1) That sure changed after the Harvard School of Public Health trotted out yet another epidemiology claim created using food frequency surveys and Center for Science in the Public Interest found something new to sue over. Here they got [Christopher Wanjek of Livescience to absolutely lose his mind inventing hyperbole](#) [3] (bold mine) "Federal and state agencies are hoping to regulate **an industrial poison** . . . produced by mixing certain **liquid organic chemicals with industrial catalysts**[.] . . . **Like asbestos**, these chemicals were once heralded for their copious beneficial properties[.] . . . We're talking about trans fats, created in laboratories, like **a Frankenstein monster**. . ." - and that was just in 200 words.

New York City Councilman Peter Vallone made the point even more succinct: "Trans fats kill babies!"

(2) Yet that sort of "lives saved or gained" numerology may be what earned him a spot running the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he proceeded to manufacture "pre-diabetes" hype and the belief that nicotine is as harmful as cigarettes.

(3) Trans fats are a non-issue in the U.S. because they are only used in a few products, and so we don't talk about them as much now, but [you can read our 2006 White Paper here](#) [4].

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(5) Though [media religiously quote Willett](#) [5] and Center for Science in the Public Interest, scientists of previous eras, who were not trapped by their specialties, stood up to their fearmongering. Dr. David Kritchevsky, esteemed Wistar Institute biochemist and cholesterol researcher, said call to banish trans fats was the "panic du jour." He rightly noted the effort would lead to a wider use of saturated fats as a substitute, with no lessening of the health risks. Exactly what has happened.

Why doesn't that happen today? In the world of Twitter, scientists don't want to be excoriated even if they know what they say is accurate.

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Links

[1] <http://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-05-2018-who-plan-to-eliminate-industrially-produced-trans-fatty-acids-from-global-food-supply>

[2] <http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/6/e010401.full.pdf+html>

[3] <https://www.livescience.com/1079-big-fat-truth.html>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2006/10/30/trans-fatty-acids-and-heart-disease>

[5] <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/5/14/17346108/trans-fats-food-world-health-organization-bloomberg-gates>