

Trans Fats Antidote

By ACSH Staff — November 12, 2006

This column first appeared in the [\[1\]Washington Times](#) [1].

We have heard angst, outrage and political rhetoric about traces of much-maligned trans fats (TFAs) in our diet -- and about the growing problem of obesity and the health problems it spawns. There is one overlooked proposal that could address both issues, leaving our foods free of TFAs and allowing us to eat french fries, ice cream and doughnuts with less risk of getting fat. The secret weapon not even considered: the fat substitute olestra.

The food cops prefer to talk about proposals that would (a) make it illegal to use oils and spreads with trans fats in restaurants and (b) require that most restaurants prominently feature calorie counts on all menu items.

These two plans actually address two very different issues:

The first -- trying to reduce heart disease rates by banning trans fats in eateries -- is based only on speculative data and unusual level of exposure. True, high levels of dietary trans fats -- derived primarily from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and frequently used in frying and preparing foods such as doughnuts and spreads -- can raise levels of LDL, the so-called "bad cholesterol." But TFAs are only one of several dietary factors that affect cholesterol levels (saturated fats are more important) and, more importantly, serum cholesterol is only one of several factors that may influence the risk of heart disease.

Cigarette smoking and high blood pressure, as well as diabetes and obesity, contribute far more to heart disease than any specific dietary factor. Even the strictest low-fat diet often modestly cuts cholesterol. So how could we expect significant effects on LDL cholesterol from banishing levels of just one type of fat -- one that on average represents less than 3 percent of our total daily calorie intake?

The second proposal would ineffectively confront a real problem, our life-threatening obesity epidemic. Including caloric information on every menu would likely do little to curb our waistlines. Most so-called "fast food" restaurants already display the calories on wall posters, food wrappers and placemats. Providing information on calories will not help if consumers do not fully understand what a desirable caloric intake actually is. A display of numbers will only confuse.

There is an obvious solution, though, that will address the perceived problems of trans fats and the real problem of obesity: invite restaurants to use olestra as a substitute for fats and oils in frying, baking and roasting. Olestra, the first noncaloric fat replacer, could be used in many ways. Not only is olestra stable in frozen products -- making it suitable for foods like ice cream -- it is stable at high temperatures, making it available for deep-frying, unlike other fat replacers. Olestra could replace a good portion of the 34% of fat calories we take in daily. In addition to protecting us from

the (speculative) threat of TFAs, olestra would protect our hearts from the real deleterious effects of saturated fat.

Why aren't nutrition advocates petitioning the Food and Drug Administration to approve a whole slew of new applications for olestra? (It is now only FDA-approved for savory snacks and microwave popcorn.)

The olestra solution is not even being considered by, for instance, those who held anti-trans-fat rallies outside the New York City Department of Health recently, nor by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. CSPI is trying to exorcise trans fats and regularly decries obesity as the work of "greedy" food companies -- but it drove many potential low-calorie and trans-fat-free products from the market with hyperbole about alleged side effects of eating olestra. For the record, there is no scientific evidence ingestion of foods made with olestra has serious gastrointestinal effects. In large quantities, it can have some minor effects -- in the same way any other high-fiber diet (lots of beans, for example) would. But people can easily adjust their diets.

Using olestra would give consumers a wider selection of foods --and permit them to enjoy foods they might otherwise shun. What's not to like about that?

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