

Trans Fat Threat Exaggerated by Some Doctors

By ACSH Staff — November 12, 2006

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The frenzy about trans fats as dietary killers is escalating. Professors from the Harvard School of Public Health tell the media that trans fats kill hundreds of thousands of us annually and represent "the most dangerous ingredient in our diet." Were this true, it would put trans fats up there with smoking, obesity, and alcohol abuse as a leading cause of death.

Outside the New York Department of Health, where hearings on a proposed ban on trans fats in restaurants were held last month, protests were held, complete with music and dancing, demanding a "Trans Fat Free NYC." The gathering was reminiscent of anti-war rallies in the late 1960s. Rally attendee and City Council Member Peter Vallone Jr. intoned that "trans fats kill babies." Months earlier, a New York Times columnist opined that trans fats in Girl Scout cookies have killed more Americans than al Qaeda.

Does ingesting trace levels of trans fats threaten heart health? No. The facts tell a different story.

High levels of dietary trans fats come mainly from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, which are frequently used in frying and the preparation of foods such as doughnuts and spreads. Trans fats can raise levels of LDL, the so-called "bad cholesterol." But they are only one of several dietary factors that affect cholesterol levels, and, more importantly, serum cholesterol is only one of several factors that may influence the risk of heart disease. 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 results only in modest cholesterol reduction. 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? For individuals with unhealthy cholesterol readings, it's saturated fats, not trans fats, they should be concerned about -- because they represent more than 10 percent of calories. Such individuals should discuss with their physicians the option of cholesterol-lowering drugs.

Given the scientific facts, why is there such an uproar about trans fats?

First, in recent years, public health authorities have increasingly turned to regulation to combat chronic disease in a fashion similar to using regulation, such as water chlorination and inoculations, to fight infectious diseases. The problem is that government intervention for chronic diseases -- which are primarily linked to lifestyle factors -- is intrusive and simply will not work. By calling for a trans fat ban on city menus, authorities are acting as if trans fats were an imminent health threat -- like E. coli in spinach -- which they are not.

Second, the hyperbole about trans fats has escalated as a result of the media's constantly quoting

a handful of anti-trans fat scientists from the Harvard School of Public Health (an institution that showed its ideological tilt by giving its highest achievement award last year to environmental activist Erin Brockovich). Indeed, one of those scientists, Dr. Walter Willett, participated in the anti-trans fats rally in New York. Do these scientists represent the scientific mainstream view? Most likely, they do not. Yet the media have not exerted a great deal of effort to present the views of scientists who can put the trans fat issue in proper perspective.

Third, the food industry has turned the fear of trans fats into a brilliant marketing strategy -- trumpeting the "No Trans Fats" claim on labels. Unsuspecting customers will wrongly conclude the products are healthier and less caloric. Recently, Kentucky Fried Chicken got into the act by announcing -- during the NYC hearings -- that it was phasing out trans fats, practically claiming that their fried fare, if made trans fat-free, would be eligible for the Health Food Hall of Fame.

We have lost perspective on the important threats to our health: smoking, obesity, excessive alcohol use and more. And if we ban trans fats, we move one step closer to endorsing the principle that government should determine what we eat and how we should live -- even when the data and expected benefits are skimpy.

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