Trans Fatty Acids: Just the Latest Scare du Jour Served Up by CSPI

By ACSH Staff — August 7, 1996

In its latest attempt to scare consumers and drum up publicity for itself, the Center for Science in the Public Interest is now warning that the *trans* fatty acids found in French fries, fried chicken and many other foods may cause heart attacks.

"It's been a whole week since the CSPI held a press conference to demonize a food ingredient*, so they were obviously overdue for another one," says Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, president of the American Council on Science and Health. "As usual, these champion food terrorists have plucked a few facts out of context, heated them to the distortion point and created a soufflÉ consisting largely of hot air."

*Trans* fatty acids are chemically similar to saturated fats, so it's a good idea to consume them in moderation, says Whelan. "But CSPI's assertion that *trans* fatty acids will cause heart attacks goes way beyond the evidence now available."

Whelan has detected a rather tasty irony in this latest serving from CSPI: "They've called a press conference to complain about a 'problem' that they themselves were responsible for creating!"

Several years ago, she notes, CSPI led a successful campaign to get fast-food restaurants to abandon beef tallow for frying and to use vegetable oils instead. But the only way that vegetable oil can be stabilized for use in frying is to partially hydrogenate it—a process that creates the *trans* fatty acids that CSPI is now denouncing.

"CSPI dramatically overstates the science by claiming that *trans* fatty acids cause heart attacks, and it ignores some basic facts," Dr. Whelan concludes. "First, the role of diet in influencing serum cholesterol level varies greatly among individuals. Second, if we were to eliminate *trans* fatty acids, we would only end up eating more saturated fat. Third, the answer is not to condemn one type of fat but to recognize that, as nutritionists agree, we should cut back on all types of fat to 30% of total calories.

"The best way for consumers to reduce their heart disease risk is to pay attention to the important risk factors, not *trans* fatty acids and other scares of the week trotted out by CSPI," Whelan advises. "Smokers should kick the habit, people with high blood pressure should try to get it lower and those with high blood cholesterol should see their physician about lowering it through diet changes or drug intervention."

*On July 31, CSPI held a press conference to denounce acesulfame-K, an artificial sweetener, for allegedly posing a cancer risk.*