

Separating Trans Fat from Fiction

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New York recently became the first major city to make it illegal for restaurants to use trans fats. Claiming trans fats are a major cause of heart disease, the city's Board of Health voted unanimously to remove the fats from menus. Chicago is also considering legislation to severely restrict trans fat levels in restaurants.

Similar campaigns are under way elsewhere, including Miami, New Jersey and Philadelphia. Earlier this year, the misnamed Center for Science in the Public Interest teamed up with a Washington, D.C., law firm to sue KFC to prevent its use of trans fats.

Why are trans fats suddenly the latest target for the food police? According to CSPI's Michael Jacobson, Col. Saunders' famously white suit is just a front for some deeply worrying behavior. In the KFC kitchen, the Colonel's heirs are cooking up a deadly mess of trans fats-soaked food that can, Mr. Jacobson claims, "literally take years off your life." Some trans fat scaremongers predict New York's ban could prevent up to 500 deaths a year from cardiovascular disease.

Fortunately, the scientific reality is very different from the food police's rhetoric. The trans fats-as-dietary villain story is based upon on the link between low-density-lipoprotein (LDL) and heart disease. It is this bad guy of the cholesterol family -- LDL -- that supposedly causes heart disease, and trans fats supposedly elevate LDL cholesterol levels.

The problem, however, is that the evidence for such a LDL-heart disease connection is extremely sketchy. For example, the definitive government study of the LDL-heart disease connection is a 1989 government review, Diet and Health, which references seven studies claiming to implicate LDL as a cause of heart disease.

Yet, only one study is statistically significant. It found LDL was a risk factor for heart disease only in a small population sample of women ages 40-44 and men ages 35-49. So, the foundation of the trans fat peril -- that trans fat raises LDL cholesterol levels -- is empirically very shaky.

But the science gets even worse for the trans fat storytellers. Three studies from Europe analyzed the levels of trans fat in individuals who died from heart disease. Each found no statistically significant association between trans fat and the risk of heart disease, refuting Mr. Jacobson's claim that trans fat "takes years off your life." Perhaps, the reason no connection was found is because the trans fat-LDL-heart disease thesis is not, in fact, true.

The real problem for the trans fat scare story is found in the epidemiological studies that have looked at people who eat trans fat and then determined whether they have an increased risk of getting and dying from heart disease. These studies rarely find a genuine connection between eating trans fat and getting heart disease or dying from heart disease.

Let's look, for example, at two studies (both by Harvard University, the world's trans fat study center) that are frequently cited as proving the risk of trans fat. The first studied more than 80,000 nurses. It found no statistically significant risk for heart disease from trans fat intake except among those women consuming the highest amounts of trans fat, that is, 2.9 percent of total energy intake.

Even these women had a barely increased relative risk (1.27) of heart disease. Epidemiologists suggest a relative risk below 2 is not a genuine risk.

The second study looked at fat intake and heart disease in men. It found trans fat was not linked in a statistically significant way with either heart attacks or fatal heart disease. In fact, this study failed to find any statistically significant connection between cholesterol intake and total fat intake and either heart attacks or fatal heart disease.

But the crusade against trans fat falls apart for reasons other than poor science.

A recent survey of American consumers by the NPD Group found 94 percent of those surveyed were aware both that the foods they ate contained trans fat and that trans fats supposedly represented a health risk.

Despite their knowledge, however, consumers reported this made little difference to their dietary decisionmaking. For example, restaurants report increased sales of food with trans fats, such as chicken sandwiches and cookies.

Of course, such exhibitions of consumer freedom drive the food police crazy. It also confirms their belief one cannot trust ordinary people to make the "right" decisions about what to eat. After all, the last thing a free society needs is for its citizens to make important decisions about risk and then take responsibility for them.

But the American people have already placed their order: "I'll take mine with trans fat, please."

Patrick Basham and John Luik are coauthors of *Diet Nation: Exposing the Obesity Crusade*, published this month by the Social Affairs Unit, a policy institute in London.