

Trans Fat

How to Keep It Low in Your Diet

Ingrid Adams, Nutrition and Food Science

Are you aware that some of your favorite foods may contain trans fats? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that avoiding trans fats could prevent as many as 10,000 to 20,000 heart attacks and 3,000 to 7,000 deaths from coronary heart disease per year. Trans fat may also be associated with higher risk for type 2 diabetes. There are many benefits to keeping the amounts of trans fats in your diet as low as possible.



Trans fats are generally found in commercially prepared cookies, crackers, snack foods, prepared desserts, other baked goods, fried foods, and most margarines.

What is trans fat?

Trans fats are found naturally in small amounts in certain foods such as, beef, lamb, and whole milk. Artificial trans fat can be made by heating liquid vegetable oil with hydrogen gas under pressure to make a solid product that is more stable and can withstand high temperatures. This more solid fat is made into products such as shortening or sticks of margarine. Many manufacturers use trans fat because it extends the shelf life of a product. For example, crackers can stay on the shelf for years and remain crisp because of the trans fat present.

Why all the concern about trans fat?

Eating foods containing trans fat increase the level of LDL (low density lipoprotein) in the blood. LDL is called the “bad” cholesterol because it takes cholesterol to your arteries where it forms plaque and increases your risk for a heart attack. Trans fat also lowers the level of

HDL (high density lipoprotein) in the blood. HDL is called the “good” cholesterol because it moves cholesterol from blood. The higher the level of HDL in the blood, the lower your risk for heart disease. The intake of trans fat is said to increase a person’s risk for cardiovascular disease, a leading cause of death in the United States. It is important to keep the intake of trans fat as low as possible.

How can you tell if a food contains trans fat?

Trans fats are generally found in commercially prepared cookies, crackers, snack foods, prepared desserts, other baked goods, fried foods, and most margarines. Look on labels for names such as “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” and “vegetable shortening.” This language gives a clue that the product contains trans fats. Trans fat appears under total fat on the food label. As of January 1, 2006, foods that contain more than 0.5 g of trans fat must be listed.

How much trans fat is too much?

It is not known what level of trans fat is safe but it is suggested that people on a 2000 calorie diet should get less than 1 percent of their calories, 2 grams, from trans fat. The amount of trans fat can build up quickly, especially if someone eats a lot of commercially prepared and snack foods. Table 1 shows the suggested intake of trans fat for diets of different amounts of calories.

Table 1. Suggested intake of trans fat

Total calories	1% trans fat	
	Calories	Grams
2,500	25	2.5
2,000	20	2
1,500	15	1.5
1,200	12	1.2

Is trans fat bad for kids?

When children eat more commercially prepared foods—cakes, cookies, pop tarts, breaded chicken and fish, microwave popcorn—than fruits, vegetables, and whole grain, they increase their risk of developing heart disease at an earlier age. Generally a person gets heart disease later in life, but more and more children are beginning to show early signs of heart disease such as high blood cholesterol.



Table 2. The amount of total, saturated and trans fat in selected foods

Food	Serving size	Total fat	Saturated fat	Trans fat
Biscuits, refrigerated dough	55g	6.5g	1.5g	2.0g
Cake frosting (chocolate, ready-to-eat)	35	6.5	2.0	1.0
Cheese crackers	30	9.5	2.0	2.0
Chocolate chip cookies	30	8.0	2.0	2.0
Doughnuts, sugar or glazed	55	14.0	3.5	4.0
French fries (frozen before cooking)	85	8.5	1.5	3.0
Graham crackers	30	3.0	0.5	2.0
Popcorn, microwave	30	7.5	2.0	2.5
Pound cake	80	16.5	3.5	4.5
Snack crackers	30	7.0	1.0	2.5
Taco Shells	30	8.0	1.5	2.5

Source: Consumer Report

How can I limit trans fat in my diet?

To limit trans fat in your diet:

- Use vegetable oils such as safflower, peanut, corn, soybean, olive, and canola. These oils are high in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, low in saturated fats, and do not contain cholesterol.
- Limit the use of solid margarines. Choose soft spread margarines; these products generally contain no trans fat. When purchasing margarine and other fats, take some time to look at the food label to see if the product contains trans fat.
- Limit high-fat commercial baked goods such as donuts, muffins, cookies, cakes, microwave popcorn, and pies. The majority of trans fat in the diet comes from these foods. The trans fat in these foods comes from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil used in their preparation to increase their shelf life.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label to see the amount of trans fat in foods. Choose foods that have 0 grams of trans fat. However, some food products that contain less than 0.5 grams of trans fat list the product as having 0 grams of trans fat. If the ingredient list contains any partially hydrogenated oil in the product, you know that there is trans fat in the product.
- When you have to eat fast food choose healthier options; for example, low-fat milk or water instead of soda, fruit instead of a cookie, and a small order of fries instead of a large one.
- Include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, eggs, beans and peas, and nuts and seeds in your diet.
- Prepare more meals at home. When meals are prepared at home you have control over the ingredients added.
- When eating out, choose restaurants that do not use partially hydrogenated oils.



Conclusion

The fewer trans fats you allow in your diet, the healthier you will be. Most trans fats can be found in processed foods such as cookies, crackers, donuts, and other baked goods in the form of partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Read the Nutrition Facts label on food products to find the amount of trans fat in a product. Use the tips above as well as the information presented in the tables to reduce the amounts of trans fats in your diet.

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Trans fat. Accessed February 16, 2011 from <http://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/everyone/basics/fat/transfat.html>.
- Consumer Report (2003). The stealth fat. Accessed February 16, 2011 from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?hid=119&sid=d7b07f08-ba48-4627-8d06-7822c0111760%40sessionmgr111&vid=5>.
- Consumer Report (1995). The facts about fats. Accessed February 16, 2011 from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?hid=119&sid=d7b07f08-ba48-4627-8d06-7822c0111760%40sessionmgr111&vid=5>.
- Schiff, W. J. (2009). Nutrition for healthy living (2nd ed.). New York: NY: McGraw Hill.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (2010). Dietary guidelines for Americans. Accessed February 16, 2011 from <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2010/DietaryGuidelines2010.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (2011). Trans fats on the nutrition facts label. Accessed February 16, 2011 from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/facts/nutrition/TransFatFactSheet.pdf>.