

## Are You Smarter Than A Food Label: Focus on Fats

Tue, 02/12/2013 - 2:45pm -- Saladmaster

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Cardiovascular disease is a worldwide concern. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that 17 million people die of cardiovascular diseases each year. Heart disease is the single largest cause of death due to non-communicable disease (NCD) in the world. In 2008, of the 36 million deaths due to NCDs, 17.3 million (48%) were due to cardiovascular disease. The risk factors that contribute to the prevalence of heart disease are largely controllable and include tobacco use, excessive use of alcohol, physical inactivity, high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, diabetes, and being overweight or obese, making heart disease and stroke highly preventable. Also note that the last four risk factors above relate to diet.

For many years, we have known that dietary fats contribute to high cholesterol levels and obesity. The types of fats that do the most harm are saturated fats and trans fats. Saturated fats come from most animal fats, as well as palm oil, coconut oil and cocoa butter. Trans fats are unsaturated fats altered through a process called hydrogenation to make them more solid at room temperature and are found in shortening or margarine, for example. Both saturated fats and trans fats affect the body by raising LDL (low density lipoprotein or “bad”) cholesterol. Reducing these fats in one’s diet is a common recommendation by doctors for reducing one’s cardiovascular risk.

Many food manufacturers have responded to consumer demands for heart-healthy foods, offering a variety of products that claim to be healthier because their fat content has been reduced or are labeled “trans fat-free.” However, there are important points to consider when choosing such foods:

- Low-fat does not necessarily mean healthy. For instance, most low-fat sweet treats are still loaded with sugar, which can contribute to weight gain, insulin resistance and diabetes.
- Be cautious of labels boasting “trans fat-free.” Some manufacturers are substituting palm oil or coconut oil for shortening or margarine. Thus a trans fat-free food can still be loaded with saturated fat.
- Put trans fats in perspective. One or two grams sounds harmless, but keep in mind that these fats are so damaging that intakes of less than 1% of total calories are recommended. For most people, that’s 2 grams or less per day.
- Labels listing trans fats at 0g can still contain less than 0.5g trans fat. Read the ingredients to identify trans fats: hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, margarine,

shortening.

- Statements such as 96% fat-free often are misleading. This type of claim is an indication of the fat content by weight. What is more useful is a representation of the percentage of fat by calories. Case in point: whole milk is 96.75% fat-free by weight. For 1 cup of whole milk (244g), there are 8g of fat. (8 divided by 244 = 0.0328 or 3.28%, which for practical purposes is rounded to 3.25%). However, there are 9 calories for every gram of fat. So, since there are 8 grams of fat, there are 72 calories from fat. Since there are 146 calories in 1 cup of whole milk, 49% of the calories come from fat. Furthermore, of the 8 grams of fat, 5g are saturated fat. Therefore, 31% of the calories in whole milk are coming from saturated fat. Compare that to the recommendations of cutting total fat to less than 25 - 35% of total calories, and saturated fat to less than 7% of total calories.
- Pay attention to your portion size compared to the serving size listed on the label. If the label says 1 serving is ½ cup, but you eat 1 cup, you are eating twice as many calories, fats and other nutrients listed on the label.
- Utilize the Daily Values (or Guideline Daily Amounts in Europe) if available. This is the percent of a nutrient that one serving of the food provides. As a reference, 5% or less is low while 20% or more is high. Try to aim low in total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. Aim high for vitamins, minerals and fiber.

Positive steps you can take to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease through nutrition include:

- Choose primarily a plant-based diet with a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes (beans).
- Include foods high in soluble fiber, which has been shown to decrease LDL ("bad") cholesterol when eaten regularly as part of a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol. Foods high in soluble fiber include oat bran, oatmeal, beans, peas, rice, bran, barley, citrus fruits, strawberries and apple pulp.
- Limit your intake of saturated fats by choosing fat-free and low-fat dairy products and lean meats.
- Keep your total fat intake between 25 and 35 percent of your total calories with no more than 7% of total calories coming from saturated fats. Ideal fat sources are of the monounsaturated and polyunsaturated varieties, which can be found in foods such as fish, nuts and seeds.
- Avoid or limit foods made with trans fats: margarine, shortening, fried foods and hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils. Commercially fried foods, including fast foods, are likely to be high in trans fats, saturated fats and total fat.
- If you use margarine, choose soft tub or liquid varieties over harder stick forms.
- Cakes, cookies, crackers, doughnuts, French fries, muffins and pies are examples of foods containing substantial trans fat. If you eat these at all, eat them only occasionally.

#### *References:*

1. Global Atlas on cardiovascular disease prevention and control, published by WHO in collaboration with the World Heart Federation and the World Stroke Organization, 2011.
2. Integrated Management of Cardiovascular Risk. Report of a WHO Meeting, Geneva, July 2002.
3. The American Heart Association, [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).

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