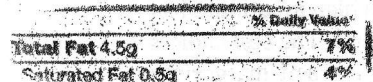


What's up with trans fat?

New labels have folks asking

The new year put into effect a new nutrition labeling requirement. Now packaged foods must list the amount of trans fat they contain. But what, you ask, is trans fat? How bad is it for you? How can you avoid it in your diet? Here's how to read the new nutrition label:



TOTAL FAT: Fats are a group of chemical compounds that contain fatty acids — chains of carbon atoms with hydrogen atoms attached. Fat is where the body stores energy, and it aids in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E, K and carotenoids (cancer-fighting substances in vegetables). On the good side, fat provides taste, consistency, stability and a feeling of being full. Unsaturated fats are even good for you, when consumed in moderation. Saturated and trans fats are not; both have been shown to raise LDL ("bad") cholesterol.

Limit daily fat intake to 65 grams or less (based on 2,000-calorie diet), with no more than 20 of those grams from saturated fat. (Note: A Double Whopper with Cheese has 54 grams of fat, 24 of them saturated.)



SATURATED FAT: The type of fat that is the main dietary cause of high blood cholesterol; found mostly in foods of animal origin such as meat, butter and whole milk and in foods from plants such as coconut oil, palm oil and cocoa butter.

Limit daily saturated fat intake to no more than 20 grams. (Skip this dessert: one slice of Cheesecake with Fruit has 29 grams of saturated fat.)

INSIDE THE BOX

'Zero' trans fat doesn't mean no trans fat. Experts give us the scoop on how the changes actually affect the food. ▶ 5E

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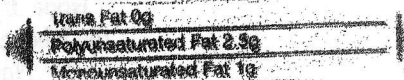


TRANS FAT

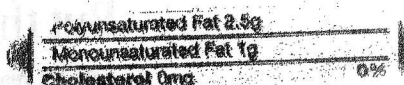
A type of fat formed when liquid oils are made into solid fats like shortening and hard margarine; found in vegetable shortenings, some margarines, crackers, cookies, snack foods, french fries, doughnuts and other food made with or fried in partially hydrogenated oils. It also occurs naturally in some animal products such as butter, milk, cheese, beef and lamb.

Trans fat tends to raise LDL ("bad") cholesterol and lower HDL ("good") cholesterol, which may increase the risk of heart disease.

Recommended amount of trans fat intake: Don't even think about it. Step away from the stick margarine (2.8 grams of trans fat per tablespoon).



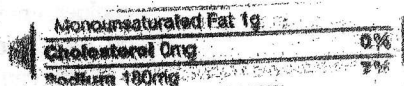
POLYUNSATURATED FAT: one of the "good" fats; usually liquid at room temperature; found mostly in foods of plant origin such as nuts and oils made from soybeans, corn and sunflowers.



MONOUNSATURATED FAT: the other "good" fat; usually liquid at room temperature; found mostly in foods of plant origin such as olive and canola oils.

As "good" fats, both monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are not believed to increase risk of heart disease or blood cholesterol as saturated fats do, but they still should be consumed in moderation because of their high-caloric content.

Daily unsaturated fat intake should be no more than 45 grams. That's about 1 cup of whole milk or 4½ tablespoons of olive oil.



CHOLESTEROL: a waxy substance that occurs naturally in the tissues of all animals; particularly high content found in liver, organ meats, egg yolks and whole milk.

The body makes all the cholesterol it needs, so you don't need it in your diet. While saturated fat and trans fat are the main causes of increased blood cholesterol levels, dietary cholesterol also plays a part.

Limit daily cholesterol intake to no more than 300 milligrams. There's 212 milligrams in one large egg and 100 milligrams in 1 tablespoon of butter — you do the math.

ART GRAPHIC BY JUDSON DRENNAN, PAUL MAGARIN
TEXT BY SUSAN HOUSTON

What's up with trans fat?

Does 0 really mean zero?

Nope. If a food has less than 0.5 gram of trans fat per serving, the label can say that it contains 0 trans fat. Be a careful label reader. Note the size of the serving and how realistic it is for your purposes. (Who eats half a pot pie?) Look for the tell-tale words "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" vegetable oil in the ingredients list.

But this label doesn't list trans fat...

And it may not, for a while. The FDA has given some companies permission to use up their old labels before switching to the new ones. Also, some of the products with new labels won't be put on the shelves until the products with old labels are sold.

Eating out

The new label requirements do not apply to restaurant food, which is notorious for trans fat content. When eating out or on the go, limit these items high in trans fat content: french fries, doughnuts, cookies, crackers, fried foods and commercial baked goods. Come on, you can do it.

If you can't resist the fried stuff, though, note that some restaurants have switched to trans fat-free oils. Ruby Tuesday uses canola oil for frying now. (Applebee's, on the other hand, still uses partially hydrogenated oils.)



Diner beware

While it's good to be conscious of trans fat content, don't automatically read "trans fat free" as "healthy." A protein bar that proudly displays its 0 trans fat grams, for instance, contains 8 grams of saturated fat (40 percent of the recommended amount for the whole day) and a whopping 320 calories.

The recommended intakes above are based on a 2,000-calorie diet. To calculate your ideal fat intake, visit www.healthcalculators.org/calculators/fat.asp or check out "The Fat Counter" by Annette Natow and Jo-Ann Heslin (Pocket.)

Butter or margarine?

This is where it gets tricky. Don't take the trans fat warning to unhealthy extremes. While hard (stick) margarine is high in trans fat, butter is high in saturated fat and cholesterol. The best choices for spreads are soft margarines (liquid or tub) with no more than 2 grams of saturated fat per tablespoon. Look for "trans fat free" on the label and "liquid vegetable oil" as the first ingredient in the list.

Dos and don'ts

■ Instead of saturated fats, use natural, unhydrogenated oils such as canola or olive oil whenever possible. Try the new trans fat free Crisco for baking.

■ Avoid processed foods, especially those that contain hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Try whole-grain crispbreads instead of buttery flavored crackers for snacking.

■ Limit saturated fat. Drink skim milk instead of whole milk; take the skin off your chicken after you cook it.

■ Use soft or liquid margarine or other low-fat, low-calorie spreads. Try unsweetened applesauce instead of butter on top of your sweet potato.

■ Avoid deep-fried foods. Bake your "french fries" at home and flavor them with salt-free seasoning; broil or bake fish or roast chicken instead of frying.

Susan Houston