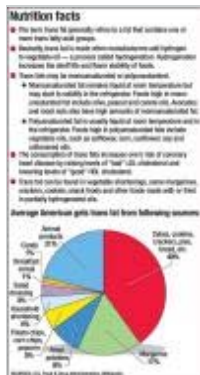




Trans fats on way out in California

By Douglas Morino, Staff Writer

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Trans Fat Nutrition Facts (click to enlarge)

They've helped make 16 million Californians too fat, contributed to alarming rates of heart disease and played a role in creating what could be the first generation of Americans with a lower life expectancy than their parents.

No wonder, then, that few people jumped off their couches to protest California's restaurant ban on trans fats, signed into law July 26.

A cheap, artery-clogging ingredient used to preserve the shelf life of cookies, salad dressing, candy and other processed foods, trans fats are

unsaturated fats devoid of nutritional value.

Leading the way once again, California became the first state to ban trans fats, also known as trans fatty acids. The ban will be phased in from Jan. 1, 2010. By Jan. 1, 2011, ingredients in restaurants, bakeries and other facilities that prepare food must be trans fat-free.

The law defines food as trans fat-free if it has no more than 0.5 grams per serving, and the law does not apply to packaged goods that cross state lines and are federally regulated.

The statewide ban follows similar prohibitions in New York, Boston and other cities.

"There hasn't been as much as an uproar (from restaurants) as when smoking was banned," said Ilene Sutter, a nutrition instructor at California State University, Northridge. She said many California restaurants saw the writing on the menu when their franchises in New York City were banned from using trans fats.

State Assemblyman Tony Mendoza, D-Artesia, who authored the law, said the harmful effects of trans fats demanded government intervention.

"As a father, I am always concerned about what my children eat," said Mendoza. "Heart disease in adults and obesity in children has been a longtime problem. The government should step in to ensure the health and well-being of its citizens, and in this case the general scientific consensus is that trans fats are bad, and they should be replaced."

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Some 42 percent of Californians are obese or overweight, and one-third of children 9 to 11 years old are overweight or at risk to become obese. Some doctors have warned that early onset Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and other maladies linked to poor nutrition could cause young Americans to have lower life expectancy than their parents.

With fines ranging from \$25 to \$1,000, the new law will go into effect Jan. 1, 2010, when restaurants and bakeries will be required to stop using oils, shortenings and margarines with trans fats in food preparation, except in deep-frying dough and batter. They will have an additional year to find other ingredients for those foods.

The law will be enforced by county health officials during routine inspections in which restaurants receive grades.

"This law won't change the way we make our products," said Sari Afriat, owner of The Baker bakery and restaurant in Woodland Hills. "We always have used healthy oils just for the sake of making a quality product."

Afriat said she has always welcomed her customers' interest in ingredients.

"We do get a lot of inquiries about what types of ingredients and fats we use, so people seem to be aware and mindful of what they are eating."

Some food specialists, however, don't think most people pay much attention to trans fats.

"I don't think it's a big deal for most people," said Terri Lisagor, a nutrition and food science assistant professor at CSUN.

"Trans fats are hidden in food, so it's not really an issue for most people," she said. "Although it's a trendy issue to talk about, if we really wanted to do something about our health, we would just get up and move around."

Woodland Hills resident Loni Klein said she watches what she eats carefully, maintains a healthy lifestyle and believes the law will have a positive impact.

"I don't want that stuff in my food," she said. "Although I don't necessarily agree that the government should be regulating what we consume in restaurants, in this case I think it's done with good intentions."

The law is supported by the Los Angeles Department of Public Health and the American Heart Association.

"It is so important to remove trans fats from restaurants because they are very harmful to everyone's health," said Dr. Paul Simon, a spokesman for the Department of Public Health.

"Trans fats have no nutritional value whatsoever. They contribute to cardiovascular and heart disease, and stroke."

Despite evidence that trans fats are harmful, some believe that legislation will not change the way people eat.

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Dr. Roger Clemens, a food science and nutrition professor at CSUN, believes the ban will have little effect.

"We don't have dangerous foods; we have dangerous lifestyles," he said, adding that trans fats account for less than 2 percent of total fats consumed in a typical diet. "People's behavior is what needs to be changed. Smoking, lack of exercise and poor diet are the main contributors to bad health, not trans fats."

douglas.morino@dailynews.com 818 713-3329

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