

Q: What are trans fats? Why put them on labels?

A: Trans fatty acids are fats found in food, like vegetable shortening, some margarines, crackers, candy, cookies, snack foods, fried food, salad dressings and many processed foods. Many food manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oil to turn the oil into a more solid fat. This is called "hydrogenation", and it creates "trans fats".

The federal Food & Drug Administration (FDA) is taking aim at "trans fat" because there is a connection between diets high in trans fat and an increased risk of heart disease. By helping consumers make better choices about the foods they eat, the government hopes to improve health--and lower government medical bills for heart disease. More than half a million Americans die from coronary heart disease every year. The FDA estimates that reducing trans fat consumption could save as much as \$1.8 billion each year in medical costs.

The FDA wants food labels in grocery stores to include information about trans fats. Under a new law, shoppers will be able to find "trans fat" amounts listed on food labels directly under the line for saturated fat.

Trans fats and saturated fats both create "bad" cholesterol in your body. But some fats create "good" cholesterol. Polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats-like olive oil, canola oil, soybean oil-have good effects.

Some foods today already label trans fat content, but all food products will have to carry the new labels by January 1, 2006. The FDA says it expects that many food manufacturers will begin using the new trans fat labels to try and gain more market share. It is hoped that "bad" fat labels will make producers work harder to find ways of lowering the amount of fat they now use, as sales of trans fat products go down.

There is no specific amount of trans fat or saturated fat that is considered too much, but nutritionists say the less trans and saturated fat in your diet the better.

Under the new rules, a food manufacturer will have to list their total fat content in each serving of their product, including a breakout of saturated and trans fat, plus cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates (dietary fiber and sugars), and protein.

Even before the new trans fat labels to come out in food stores, the "bad" fat content of a product can be found on the ingredients list: look for words like "shortening", or "partially hydrogenated vegetable oil", or "hydrogenated vegetable oil". Ingredients are listed by the largest amounts first--so eat smart by avoiding products which have these ingredients among the first listed on the label. #####