

Feed your heart

Trans fats are a main culprit in raising "bad" cholesterol, says a key study of women.

What we know about the impact of diet on cholesterol has evolved over time. This is best evidenced by the changes in the USDA food pyramid; the guidelines now call for more liberal amounts of fats in the diet, while discouraging the consumption of specific fats associated with hardening of the arteries.

Two of the biggest offenders are saturated fats and trans fats. Both are associated with coronary heart disease and now are being targeted by nutritionists and the health care industry. One reason for this is a study published in "The New England Journal of Medicine" in 1997 in which researchers looked at the type of fat intake in coronary heart disease in women. In the study, saturated and trans fats "took the cake" (pun intended) when it came to heart disease.

Let's take a closer look at trans fats. They are produced by partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, which make them into solid fats (such as margarine or shortening). Some trans fats also are found naturally in foods. A high intake of trans fats raises the LDL (the "bad" cholesterol), which in turn raises the risk for heart disease.

Trans fats are used in many products, including candies, cookies, baked goods, fried foods, crackers and other processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils -- a rather extensive list.

Unfortunately, we are not too savvy at estimating our intake of different foods. Our perception of what we consume tends to be very different from what we actually consume. This was confirmed in a report from the USDA.

Fortunately, some in the food industry understand the potential problem with trans fats in the diet; they've worked to reduce the amount in the products we buy. Frito-Lay, for example, has made sweeping changes in many of its snack products, dramatically reducing the amount of trans fats. In New York City, there's a push by the health department for the city's restaurants to stop serving foods containing trans fats. More and more, those who make or serve products for public consumption are attempting to change the quality of what we put on our plates and in our mouths.

But it's not up to others to improve our health. We are responsible for our own health. It is up to us to bone up on the facts. The first step in improving our diet is understanding more about it. To keep your heart healthy, learn what raises cholesterol. The new food guide pyramid can help you; visit mypyramid.gov for details.

The knowledge that you gain from learning more about cholesterol can help you and your family. The heart attack you prevent may be your own!

Contributing Editor Tedd Mitchell, M.D., is medical director of the Wellness Program at the renowned Cooper Clinic in Dallas.

**Heart disease
kills more
women than
men every year -
- and women's
rates are rising.**

THE GOOD FATS

Increase your intake of these fat sources:

- nuts
- vegetable oils
- fish

THE BAD FATS

Limit these solid fats:

- butter
- shortening
- margarine
- lard

Source: Women's Heart Foundation
