

Regional colleges ditching trans fats

UNCC, J&W making switch; Queens got rid of it for spring semester

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College students don't always go for salads and other healthy fare in their cafeterias. But now, schools are making sure even the fried foods and sweets they reach for are healthier.

Many N.C. colleges and universities are joining restaurants and food companies across the nation in getting rid of trans fats from menu items such as fried chicken, egg rolls and chocolate chip cookies.

The fats are being replaced with other oils or, in some cases, butter in dining hall staples like french fries and chicken sandwiches -- and so far, students aren't having to pay more for the more expensive products.

Some schools have gotten rid of some of the fats, which are criticized for raising bad cholesterol and decreasing good cholesterol. Among them are UNC Chapel Hill, Queens University of Charlotte and Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory.

UNC Charlotte and Johnson & Wales University also are making the switch. Both schools, as well as Duke University, use the Charlotte-based Compass Group USA as their food provider.

Earlier this month, Compass replaced its margarine and spreads with zero-trans fat versions. Later this year, the company will phase in trans fat-less fried foods and bakery goods. It also is using new fryer oil without trans fats

Compass joins competitors Aramark and Sodexo USA in making the change. Both companies have replaced their fryer oils and Sodexo also offers other zero-trans fat foods, such as chicken fingers.

So far, the change has been well-received.

"Nobody gets upset when they get some healthier products," said Rich Yokeley, director of dining services at Queens, which starting using zero trans fat products during the spring semester.

Major debate: The battle over trans fats, also called partially hydrogenated oils, has been a major diet debate in recent years. The Food & Drug Administration now requires food companies to list trans fat content on nutrition labels. Meanwhile, a California nonprofit has sued large food companies to get rid of the fats.

In the past, food companies depended on trans fat because it's more solid like butter, but cheaper, said Deanne Brandstetter, director of nutrition for Compass Group. It also adds flavor, makes foods last longer and extends the life of cooking oils.

But research has shown trans fats have a negative impact on the body, including increasing the risk for heart disease. So companies began looking for substitutes.

Aramark dining centers use a blend of corn and sunflower fryer oil. Within Compass, butter or palm and other tropical oils may be used in place of shortening. At Johnson & Wales in uptown Charlotte, the student cooks will use pure butter in preparing food starting this fall, said Dean Zoch, director of dining services. But, he said, "if there is a cost-effective alternative that doesn't have bad side effects or doesn't destroy the taste profile, then we may consider it." Zoch and others said customers aren't likely to detect a difference in the taste of foods, except perhaps in bakery products. Johnson & Wales will hold food tastings and informational meetings to help advertise the change. At UNC Charlotte, Robert Huizar said Thursday he tries to eat well by not eating so much fast food and paying attention to trans fats. He said he thinks it's a good idea that colleges are getting rid of the fats, saying it can be hard for some students to avoid unhealthy food.

Katie McCormick, a UNCC employee who works at the Atkins library, also supports the change.

"Although everyone likes to have choices to eat and what they do," she said, "I think ultimately the universities have a responsibility to students ... to provide them with healthy choices."

Trans Fat 101 *The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on trans fat.*

Q. What is trans fat? Trans fat is a type of fat formed when liquid oils are made into solid fats like shortening and hard margarine.

Q. What food is it in? Vegetable shortening, some margarines, crackers, snacks and other food made with or fried in partially hydrogenated oils. Also found naturally in some animal products, like butter, milk products, beef and lamb.

Q. How does it affect cholesterol? Trans fat raises the low density lipoprotein ("bad") cholesterol in the blood and also lowers high density lipoprotein ("good") cholesterol. Elevated LDL cholesterol increases the risk of developing coronary heart disease.

Q. How do I know if it's in my food? The FDA requires food companies to list the amount of trans fat on the Nutrition Facts panel. Companies can state there is zero trans fat in their food, but still list shortening or partially hydrogenated oil among ingredients if there is less than 0.5 grams of the fat per serving. *Source: U.S. FDA*