



Evolving Attitudes

Tracking US perceptions of dietary fat

In the 1970s, higher intake of dietary fat in the US was believed to be associated with increased weight gain and increased risk of heart disease. Thirty years of research have disproved this on both fronts.

Fat intake has not increased, but obesity rates have soared – and a new disease state called ‘metabolic syndrome’ has been created.



On Jan 1, 2006 a new food labelling law came into force in the US, requiring the content of TFA to be listed on all retail food packages.

Long-term observational studies found no relationship between fat intake and heart disease. Carefully controlled weight-loss studies have shown that a diet high in fat and low in carbohydrate results in weight loss twice as fast as a low fat diet.

Current thinking is shifting to ‘total calories’ and a diet with a balance of fat, protein and carbohydrate as being essential to good health.

In the 1980s, sharp polarisation occurred among different kinds of fat. Fats were designated ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Saturated fat was deemed to be the worst kind, being ‘artery clogging’, and campaigns were launched to remove it from the food supply. Oils and fats that contained higher levels of saturates, including palm oil, were called ‘saturated fats’.

Trans fatty acids (TFA) were promoted as a healthy alternative, as it provided the same functionality and stability as saturated fat. On hindsight we can agree that it was a bad decision to replace a fat that our own body makes and incorporates into every cell, with a synthetic substance that is made by partially hydrogenating polyunsaturated oils.

Scientific studies over the last 20 years have shown that TFA is in fact several times worse than saturated fats with respect to heart disease. The possible effect on other disease states is not known.

On Jan 1, 2006 a new food labelling law came into force in the US, requiring the content of TFA to be listed on all retail food packages. Many food companies and retailers decided to eliminate TFA altogether. Legislative bodies across the country are attempting to ban TFA from restaurants, because customers have no way of knowing how much of it is in their food.

New debate

This has led to the need for a replacement for partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Palm oil is ideally suited as it has the stability and functionality required for many food products. However some reports have questioned whether substituting partially hydrogenated oil with a 'saturated fat' would be an improvement.

Palm oil is not a 'saturated fat' – it has a balance of different fatty acids, containing an equal proportion of unsaturated and saturated fat. And saturated fats have been shown to be several times healthier than TFA on a one-to-one basis.

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Nonetheless, to answer concerns, Loders Croklaan convened a roundtable of



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experts to study solid fat, no-TFA alternatives to partially hydrogenated vegetable oil and determine if they were a nutritionally appropriate substitute. In their report, palm oil was found to be a suitable alternative to partially hydrogenated fat where a long shelf-life or a solid fat is required in the finished product.

Now a new debate has begun: based on

evidence that saturated fat doesn't really do anything. Ten years of new research has revealed that saturated fat may not be 'artery clogging' after all, and that it neither increases nor decreases risk of heart disease.

Natural saturated fats like those found in palm oil, increase 'good cholesterol' (HDL) more than any other food ingredient. Increased HDL is associated with a decreased risk of heart disease, and cancels the increased risk associated with elevated 'bad cholesterol' (LDL).

This positive effect of HDL is supported by several observational studies, such as the Nurses Health Study at Harvard University, in which saturated fat neither increased nor decreased incidence of heart disease.

With nutrition science constantly evolving, we can expect another major shift in our thinking about oils and fats within the next few years.

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This is an edited version of the article.