

US bans 'unsafe' trans fats in food (Update)

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Artificial trans fats found in everything from margarine to cookies and frozen pizzas are not safe to eat and must be removed from food in the next three years, US regulators said Tuesday.

Also often used in frosting and crackers, partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs) contribute to heart disease and fatal heart attacks in thousands of Americans every year, said the US Food and Drug Administration, calling them not "generally recognized as safe."

"The FDA's action on this major source of artificial trans fat demonstrates the agency's commitment to the heart health of all Americans," said acting FDA commissioner Stephen Ostroff, confirming a 2013 proposal to ban them.

"This action is expected to reduce coronary heart disease and prevent thousands of fatal heart attacks every year."

Partially hydrogenated oils carry no health benefits and the Institute of Medicine has previously determined that no level is safe for consumption.

Food manufacturers in the United States have been required since 2006 to include trans fat content information on canned and packaged food labels.

The law still allows foods to be labeled as having zero grams of trans fat if they contain less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving, but FDA

officials said that a separate effort is under way to change that, and that PHOs will no longer be allowed in any foods after three years unless they get a specific exemption from regulators.

The FDA has said the labeling rule and actions taken by the food industry have already led to a 78 percent decrease in trans fat consumption in the past decade.

"While trans fat intake has significantly decreased, the current intake remains a public health concern," the FDA said.

According to Rebecca Blake, director of clinical nutrition at Mount Sinai Beth Israel in New York, the current labeling laws are misleading consumers.

"If one serving of a product has less than 0.5g of trans fat, it can be legally labeled trans-fat free. But are people really eating only one cookie or five fries? The servings often add up and the consumer ends up with far more trans fats in their diet than they realize."

Petitions to allow

Food manufacturers have three years to "either reformulate products without PHOs and/or petition the FDA to permit specific uses of PHOs," the agency said.

By mid-June 2018, no partially hydrogenated oils can be "added to human food unless they are otherwise approved by the FDA."

The Grocery Manufacturers Association said it was pleased with the three-year time period because it "provides time needed for food manufacturers to complete their transition to suitable alternatives and/or seek food additive approval," a statement said.

The GMA, which represents some 300 leading food and beverage companies, is planning to file its own food additive petition to the FDA in the coming days, a spokesman told AFP.

"It will show that the presence of trans fat from the proposed low level uses of partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs) is as safe as the naturally occurring trans fat present in the normal diet," said the GMA statement.

"I think it's the difference between zero and nearly zero," said GMA spokesman Roger Lowe, who declined to give specifics about which companies or products still want to be able to use artificial trans fats in processing.

The FDA move bans artificial trans fats, not the trans fats that occur naturally in some dairy, beef and lamb products.

Consumer health groups applauded the FDA decision and said that artificial trans fat harms the body by elevating bad cholesterol and lowering good cholesterol.

"The eventual elimination of artificial trans fat from the food supply will mean a healthier food supply, fewer heart attacks and heart disease deaths, and a major victory for public health," said Center for Science in the Public Interest executive director Michael Jacobson.

"The final determination made today by the Food and Drug Administration gives companies more than enough time to eliminate the last of the partially hydrogenated oil that is still used in foods like microwave popcorn, biscuits, baked goods, frostings and margarines."

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