



Ban the Trans!

New recommendations mean trans fat is on its way out of Canadian foods

The days of trans fat in Canadian foods are numbered. Rather than banning the controversial fat outright, trans fat will be capped at a threshold of five per cent for most foods and two per cent in vegetable oils and margarines, the per cent being based on the total fat content.

This June the Trans Fat Task Force, which came into being in early 2005, submitted its report to the minister of Health. Based in part on the Danish experience – the country not the baked good – the task force recommends the development of regulations to limit trans fat in foods. It proposed that regulations be developed by 2008, with an implementation period over the subsequent two years, with most foods being regulated by 2009.

The Canadian solution is based on consideration of what is needed to lower the amount of trans fat in foods without discriminating against naturally occurring trans fat in items such as dairy (which can contain between two and five per cent) and meat products derived from ruminant animals (which may contain up to eight per cent). While all trans fat has an adverse effect on heart health, it is also unavoidable. For instance, trans fat from dairy and meat are the result of bio-hydrogenation related to the microbial action in the digestive process of ruminants. And even non-hydrogenated oils used in cooking (such as deep frying at high temperatures) may result in trans fat levels of between 0.2 and one per cent.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that the amount of trans fat consumed daily should be no more than one per cent of energy intake. The average Canadian consumes an estimated three to nine grams per day. Therefore, the five per cent upper threshold on trans fat would result in a 55-per-cent decrease in consumption, meaning average consumption would be consistent with WHO recommendations. It would also mean that most industrially produced trans fat would be removed from the Canadian diet, with most of the remaining trans fat deriving from naturally occurring sources.

While it may seem a bit presumptive to begin a regulatory process after less than a year of mandatory labelling regulations obliging the declaration of trans fat, over the past

three years many manufacturers have already reduced or eliminated trans fat from their products. The task force has concluded, however, that a voluntary approach would not be sufficient to meet the WHO target, and thus favours a regulated approach. The approach would regulate manufactured foods from an output perspective (finished food) and food-service from an input perspective (ingredients).

Under current Canadian regulations trans fat is a core nutrient that must be declared as part of nutrition facts. The amount may only be rounded to zero grams if the food meets the nutrient content claims criteria for trans fat-free. This means food must contain less than 0.2 g of trans fat and no more than two grams of saturated fatty acids per serving of stated size and reference amount. In any other case it will be rounded to the nearest 0.1 g. In the U.S.

the amount of trans fat, also a core nutrient, may be rounded down to zero grams if it is less than 0.5 g per serving. A Canadian nutrition facts table, in contrast to its American counterpart, also represents the per cent Daily Value (DV) based on the combined amount of saturated fat and trans fat. There is currently no DV for trans fat in the U.S.

It's also hard to believe that in the "land of the free" U.S. regulations do not provide for a "trans fat-free" claim. Instead, U.S. food labels may include a statement about the amount of trans fat (for example, "zero grams trans fat per serving"). These statements may be made regardless of the amount of saturated fat. The loophole in Canada, which all decent manufacturers ignore anyway, will be plugged in the next round of regulatory updates. Canadian labels in this regard are better at telling the whole truth about trans fat.

Finally, keep in mind that the Trans Fat Task Force recommendations are not an automatic trigger to the creation of regulations. However, given the mood in Parliament among all party lines, it's likely that action will soon be taken on the trans fat issue.

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Gary Gnirss is a partner and president of Legal Suites Inc., a Mansfield, Ont.-based firm specializing in regulatory software and services. E-mail: president@legalsuites.com