

# The artificial taming of the fat scare

by Gyorgy Scrinis

*Sydney Morning Herald*, Op-Ed,  
May 11, 2007

Over the past couple of years trans fats have been turned from a potential marketing disaster into a marketing edge for the food industry. The trans fat issue is now being framed in a way that allows the industry to be able to just reduce the level of trans fats in foods, or to simply replace one set of processing techniques and reconstituted ingredients with other equally artificial and suspect techniques and ingredients.

Trans fatty acids are produced when vegetable oils are "hydrogenated", a processing technique that transforms liquid oils into solids. Hydrogenated oils have been used to make margarine, for deep-frying and as ingredients in the fast food and processed food industries. They provide foods with qualities such as a crunchy texture and a long shelf life. Artificial trans fats need to be distinguished from trans fats that occur naturally in meat and dairy products.

Artificial trans fats and hydrogenated oils should have been eliminated from the food supply decades ago and after much prodding some countries are now moving down this track. We have known some of the health threats posed by trans fats for years, although it is only recently that any significant efforts have been made to alert the public to the threats or to reduce the fats' presence in foods.

But where foreign governments are moving to meet the threat from artificial trans fats head-on, Food Standards Australia New Zealand has decided not to follow. In a report this week, the authority admits trans fats pose a number of health threats, particularly in relation to heart disease. Yet it has decided that regulations either to limit the level of trans fats in foods or to mandate the labelling of trans fat levels in foods are not required.

The authority even intends to permit foods that contain low levels of trans fats to carry health claims that such foods can reduce the risk of heart disease. By comparison, the US Government has introduced trans fat labelling regulations, New York City has banned trans fats in restaurants and takeaway foods, and Denmark has imposed limits on trans fat in foods.

The potential dangers of these artificial forms of trans fats have been known for decades. Since the early 1990s studies have indicated that trans fats are a "bad fat" since they not only raise total cholesterol levels, but also raise "bad cholesterol" levels and lower "good cholesterol" levels. Other studies have linked trans fats to diabetes, obesity and allergies.

But this emphasis on good and bad fats and cholesterol levels by nutritionists, public health authorities and the food industry, lies at the heart of the taming of the trans fat scare.

Let's not forget that it was this discourse of good and bad fats and cholesterol levels that nutritionists and health bodies, such as the Heart Foundation, used to encourage us to eat trans fat-laden margarines in the first place, instead of saturated fat-laden butter. Now we are told that trans fats are a "bad fat" mainly because of their effects on cholesterol levels, rather than because it is a highly processed food.

This artificial "nutrient" is now being placed in the same category as the saturated fats that occur naturally in animal-derived foods. This blurs the distinction between natural and artificial foods and, by extension, blurs the distinction between wholefoods and highly processed foods in terms of their healthfulness.

By framing the problem of trans fats in this way, the solution is similarly framed in terms of the need to merely modify the fat profile of foods, rather than to avoid and remove hydrogenated oils and other highly processed and chemically engineered foods and ingredients from the diet altogether - all good news for the food processing industry.

New techniques for producing, blending and further chemically transforming hydrogenated oils have been developed that result in low levels of trans fats, or oils that are "virtually trans-free", as you will see on food labels. Other equally highly processed, technologically engineered and essentially artificial ingredients are also being used to replace or reduce the use of hydrogenated oils.

The focus on nutrient and fat profiles also opens marketing opportunities for the food industry. For example, the Heart Foundation - which until recently awarded its red tick to foods laden with trans fats - has now rewarded McDonald's with a tick, in part for reducing the quantities of trans fats in some of its meals, rather than eliminating them.

Trans fats and hydrogenated oils will remain in the Australian food supply for the foreseeable future, with their presence hidden from the consumer because of the absence of labelling regulations.

[Dr Gyorgy Scrinis is a research associate in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University.]