

The Law of Unintended Food Consequences

by Hank Cardello

Last year a forward-thinking legislator in Chicago's local government suggested a ban on trans fats in city restaurants. The proposal received widespread publicity, along with the protests of numerous area restaurant owners who claimed that the ban was too expensive – healthier replacement oils would price them out of the competition. While Chicago debated, New York City acted. The city's Board of Health mandated that artificial trans fats be eliminated from cooking oils by July, 2008.

This appears to be progress in the fight against obesity and life-threatening illnesses like heart disease, stroke, and some forms of cancer. Trans fats, after all raise your “bad” cholesterol and lower your “good” cholesterol. Medical authorities generally agree that no amount in your diet is good for your health.

But the law of unintended consequences might be at work here. We have a classic situation of the cure being worse than the problem. Just as animal fats commonly used for frying foods (remember how good McDonald's french fries tasted?) were demonized for their high cholesterol and saturated fat content and replaced by restaurants with high trans fat vegetable oils, so too today do we find ourselves in a similar situation.

Among those frying oils fast replacing trans fats loaded partially hydrogenated oils are the relatively new Interesterified, or “IE,” oils. While the IEs pass the no-trans fats test, these new oils may cause another problem. Recent research conducted by K.C. Hayes, a noted expert on fats from Brandeis University, indicates that we may be creating a new dietary threat. In an article for the journal, *Nutrition and Metabolism*, Hayes and his researchers found that IE oils resulted in elevated fasting glucose levels and reduced insulin values compared to naturally structured fats. In fact, they were demonstrated to be even worse than the partially hydrogenated oils they replaced.

High glucose and reduced insulin levels? This is anathema to diabetics. Diabetes has been labeled an “epidemic” by New York City Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden. One of the main causes of diabetes is obesity, and there are arguments that this disease is far more costly to society than other end-of-life illnesses. As more restaurants convert to these new types of oils, it may actually cause an increase in the incidences of the disease.

The government and the food purveyors need to look at the big picture. It's not about tackling individual components such as trans fats, saturated fats, sugars or carbohydrates or any other ingredient, for that matter. It's about the net effect of making any change. The reality is that the amount of calories consumed from eating fried foods will not be reduced by these measures. Isolating a single food element probably will have no positive health effects on the general population. Even NYU's eminent nutritionist, Marion Nestle, has posited this argument.

It's time for the industry to offer truly healthy alternatives, and not quick fixes to satisfy the public outcry for immediate action. Why not produce foods that are healthier and have no noticeable difference in taste than the less desirable foods that they're replacing? They still will be profitable. It merely requires a modicum of creativity and number-crunching by nutritionists, chefs, and food providers.

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