

**TO:** Robert W. Healy, City Manager  
**FROM:** Karen Hacker, Interim Chief Public Health Officer  
**DATE:** November 15, 2006  
**SUBJECT:** Response to Policy Order #17, dated 10/16/06

**Text of Order:** That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to direct the Department of Public Health to investigate a program to decrease trans fats in food served in Cambridge restaurants.

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Improving the diet of the American public is critical if we, as a society, hope to win the battle against cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and curb the obesity epidemic.

Recently, the New York City Department of Health proposed an amendment to its health code that would phase out artificial trans fat in the city's 24,000 restaurants and other food service establishments. The NYC Department of Health singled out trans fat based on recent medical studies indicating that there may not be *any* safe level of trans fat in the human diet.<sup>1</sup>

What's *so bad* about trans fat?

After reviewing the medical literature and consulting with physicians and nutritionists, the Cambridge Public Health Department has concluded that artificial trans fats pose an unnecessary and avoidable human health risk, and where possible, should be replaced with heart healthy alternatives.

Trans fat, like saturated fat, increases the risk of coronary heart disease by raising "bad" (LDL) cholesterol. Unlike saturated fat, however, trans fat also decreases "good" cholesterol (HDL), increases blood levels of triglycerides as compared with the intake of other fats, and may also influence other risk factors for coronary heart disease.<sup>2</sup> Based on these effects, Harvard medical researchers estimate that 72,000 to 228,000 coronary heart disease events (heart attacks and deaths) could be averted every year in the United States by the near-elimination of industrial produced trans fat.<sup>3</sup>

While trans fat occurs naturally in low levels in milk and beef, the majority (about 80%) of trans fat consumed in the United States is in the form of partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, an artificial fat manufactured by the food processing industry. Partially hydrogenated vegetable oils have long been popular with the food industry because of their long shelf life and stability during deep-frying.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietary Reference Intakes for Energy, Carbohydrate, Fiber, Fat, Fatty Acids, Cholesterol, Protein, and Amino Acids. Institute of Medicine: 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Mozaffarian D, et al. Trans Fatty Acids and Cardiovascular Disease. New England Journal of Medicine: 2006; 354: 1601-13. (April 13, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Artificial trans fat can be found in<sup>4</sup>:

*Cooking oils and spreads*

- Vegetable oils used for frying, baking, and cooking
- Shortening (hard vegetable oil)
- Margarine and other spreads

*Prepared foods*

- Pre-fried foods, such as French fries, fried chicken, chicken nuggets, fish fillets, chips, taco shells, and doughnuts
- Baked goods, such as hamburger buns, pizza dough, crackers, cookies, cakes, pies, and pastries
- Pre-mixed ingredients, such as pancake mix, hot chocolate, salad dressing, croutons, and bread crumbs.

## National trends

Since the 1990s, public health advocates have been calling attention to the health risks posed by trans fatty acids. As a result of a petition filed in 1994 by the consumer group Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the Food and Drug Administration now requires (as of January 1, 2006) that packaged foods and dietary supplements list trans fat content on their “Nutrition Facts” label.

CSPI petitioned the Food and Drug Administration again in 2004, this time requesting the agency prohibit the use of partially hydrogenated oil as a food ingredient. CSPI has also launched a major grassroots campaign to encourage food manufacturers to reformulate their products and filed lawsuits against high profile fast food chains to force them to stop using partially hydrogenated oils.

Meanwhile, municipalities have begun addressing the use of trans fat in restaurants and other food establishments. New York City’s proposed ban on trans fat in restaurants followed a year-long education campaign aimed at voluntary reduction. A Chicago city alderman is currently asking fast food chains in the Windy City to greatly limit their trans fat usage or face a potential ban. North Carolina requires its public schools to use trans-fat-free oils in preparing lunches.

Finally, some national restaurant chains are choosing to eliminate or significantly reduce the use of trans fat in their cooking. These chains include:

- Wendy’s
- Cheesecake Factory
- Au Bon Pain
- Uno Chicago Grill
- Legal Sea Foods
- California Pizza Kitchen
- KFC

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<sup>4</sup> Does Your Kitchen Need an Oil Change? What Every Restaurant and Food Service Establishment Needs to Know About Trans Fat. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

## Recommendations

Given the substantial health risks posed by trans fat, the Cambridge Public Health Department believes that the city's restaurants and other food purveyors should reduce or eliminate trans fat in their cooking, frying, and baking. This would be an important part of the city's overall obesity prevention strategy which includes *Healthy Living Cambridge* activities, transportation and pedestrian initiatives, and successful school-based programs.

To accomplish the goal of reducing trans fat use in restaurant meals, the public health department recommends working in partnership with appropriate city agencies (e.g., Inspectional Services, Licensing Commission), local business associations, and Cambridge restaurants and other food establishments to develop an educational program aimed at the following activities:

- Assessing current use of trans fat in the city's 425 restaurants.
- Educating restaurant owners and staff about health risks posed by trans fat.
- Engaging restaurant inspectors and licensing commission staff in this issue.
- Examining availability and cost of healthier, unsaturated fats and oils.
- Developing incentives for restaurants and food establishments to go "trans fat-free."
- Evaluating effectiveness of overall effort.

At this time, the Cambridge Public Health Department is not considering regulating trans fat use in the city's restaurants and other food establishments. The department strongly believes that the opportunity to build a lasting relationship with the restaurant community outweighs the short-term benefit of banning trans fat use through regulation.