

Save me from myself!



New York is cutting trans-fats from restaurant menus to cut down on heart disease — what a good idea.

Apoorva Mandavilli

I'm so lucky I live in a city that, with or without my consent, seems determined to save me from killing myself.

First, New York banned smoking in public places. And now, as of today, trans-fats have been banned from restaurant menus. That's right. By law, the city's 24,000 restaurants will soon have to switch to healthy cooking.

As you can imagine, some fast-food chains — and advocates for personal liberties — are practically foaming at the mouth at this move. Where will it all end? Visions of daily alcohol rations and obligatory morning jogs fill the imagination. How dare the government interfere. But before we get carried away by the invasion of liberties argument, let's consider the facts.

Trans-fats are undoubtedly the vilest thing to hit food since monosodium glutamate (MSG). According to the best science, they raise the levels of bad cholesterol, lower the levels of good cholesterol and generally mess with your body, contributing to obesity, heart disease and diabetes. They have absolutely no known benefits and yet are intentionally added to foods — they're made when manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oil to increase its shelf life and make it taste less greasy. "It's as if somebody were adding arsenic to hamburger mix," says Walter Willett, trans-fat guru and professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health.

Just five grams of trans-fats per day increases your chances of a heart attack by 25%. And five grams isn't all that much. A large serving of McDonald's fries has about 8 grams of trans-fats. Your daily chocolate croissant from Starbuck's has six.

Heart disease is New York City's leading cause of deaths. And by the most conservative estimate, getting rid of trans-fats would save about 500 lives in New York each year¹.

Cut it out

All kinds of scientific groups, including the venerable Institute of Medicine, agree that the acceptable intake of trans-fat is zero grams. Or as little above that as possible.

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And that's possible to do. Restaurants can easily substitute trans-fats with olive, canola or peanut oils, for not that much additional cost. New York's new law limits each menu item to less than half a gram of trans-fats per serving.

Already, KFC, Wendy's, Arby's, Taco Bell and several others have announced that they plan to switch to the healthier oils. McDonald's has reportedly said it will need until July 2008 to comply.

And the trend is spreading. Louisville, Chicago and Cambridge, Massachusetts, have already started to follow in New York's footsteps on the trans-fat ban (although, to be fair, Denmark did it first in 2003).

Some critics say that rather than ban trans-fats altogether, the city should just require restaurants to disclose the trans-fat content of their food. But that doesn't seem very realistic, or easily enforceable. And why should this aspect of personal health be left up to the individual to decide? Is this ban really so different from requiring people to wear seat belts or helmets?

Taste test

But don't get me wrong: I'm not entirely without reservations. I practically worship curly fries, which are usually dripping with trans-fats. So last night, I went to dinner with some friends at a restaurant that cut out trans-fats about six weeks ago. At least, the menus said so, and the waitress confirmed it.

The curly fries, mozzarella sticks and burgers we ordered were tasty — more or less. Maybe it's because we knew they'd been cooked in healthier oil, but they just didn't taste the same.

"It's... un-greasy," declared my friend Raj rather unscientifically, holding up one suspiciously un-shiny fry to the light. "It's not splattering grease onto my lips the way I like it to," added Ashish.

The city's energetic health czar, Thomas Frieden, and the restaurant owners that the health department cites in its press releases, all claim that the healthier oils taste no different. Or that they in fact taste better. "No one will miss them when they're gone," Frieden declared about trans-fats.



Guilty pleasures: getting rid of trans-fats would save about 500 lives in New York each year.

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Honestly, Frieden, I thank you from the bottom of my soon-to-be-healthy heart. But on the matter of whether I'll miss my fries or not, at least, I'd like to be the judge.

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References

1. Mozaffarian D. H., *et al.* N. Engl. J. Med., 354 . 1601 - 1613 (2006). | [Article](#) | [PubMed](#) | [ChemPort](#) |