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Palm Oil in Pre-packaged Foods

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Over the last several decades, nutrition experts have strongly encouraged the public to consume less saturated fat and cholesterol (typically found in animal products) and instead consume more mono- and poly-unsaturated fats (typically from plant and vegetable sources).

To address this issue, many products on the supermarket shelves started to include partially hydrogenated plant oils: a chemically modified form of oil that had a longer shelf life like saturated fat, but was cholesterol free. We now know that partially hydrogenated oils contain trans fats, and they this type of fat is particularly deleterious to our health. The evidence against trans fats is so strong that the FDA now began requiring the trans fatty acid content of packaged food to appear on the Nutrition Facts label as of January 1, 2006. Since then, Tiburon, CA, New York City, NY and Philadelphia, PA have all banned the use of trans fats in restaurants on a citywide level, and more broad bans are being considered nation wide.

Now that the use of trans fats is no longer encouraged, many manufacturers have turned to palm oil as an alternative. Palm oil is a unique type of plant oil that contains 50% saturated fat, no trans fats, and no cholesterol. For these reasons, it is thought to be a good alternative to partially hydrogenated oils in packaged foods. However,

there is controversy on the health effects of palm oil, specifically regarding its effects on blood lipids and heart health. Of the many clinical studies that have been performed to examine these effects in humans, both positive and negative data has emerged. In subjects who started out with high cholesterol levels, a diet high in palm oil caused an increase in LDL cholesterol compared to diets high in unsaturated plant oils such as soybean and canola (Vega-Lopez). However, in subjects who had normal cholesterol levels, no negative effect of palm oil on LDL or total cholesterol was observed (Khosla). Palm oil also has several beneficial properties, including high levels of beta-carotene and vitamin E. Therefore, the current consensus is that we don't know what the long term effects of diets high in palm oil are when consumed as part of a U.S. diet. So, the same advice still stands: aim to consume a diet that consists of whole, fresh foods and limit the amount of pre-packaged, processed foods which contain ingredients whose health effects we don't quite understand!

References:

Vega-Lopez et al. (2006) American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. 84:54-62.

Khosla, P. (2006) Palm Oil: A Nutritional Overview. AgroFoods 17(3).

American Palm Oil Council:
<http://www.americanpalmoil.com/palmtruth.html>

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