



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 18, 2015

FDA Bans Trans Fat Source in Processed Foods

Despite the lack of a provision in the Constitution authorizing the federal government to regulate Americans' diets, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [announced](#) Tuesday that food manufacturers would no longer be permitted to use "partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs), the primary dietary source of artificial trans fat in processed foods," because the agency has deemed them not "generally recognized as safe" for human consumption.



"Food manufacturers will have three years to remove PHOs from products," the FDA declared. "Following the compliance period, no PHOs can be added to human food unless they are otherwise approved by the FDA."

"The FDA's action on this major source of artificial trans fat demonstrates the agency's commitment to the heart health of all Americans," FDA Acting Commissioner Stephen Ostroff said in a statement. "This action is expected to reduce coronary heart disease and prevent thousands of fatal heart attacks every year."

It's true that trans fats have been linked to heart disease as well as weight gain and memory loss. However, as *Reason's* Peter Suderman [pointed out](#), "The FDA is declaring total war on an enemy that has largely been defeated." By the agency's own estimate, Americans' trans fat consumption dropped 78 percent between 2003 and 2012, to the point that most people consume about one gram of the stuff a day.

"There is no data to support the claim that the very, very low levels of trans fat in the [American] diet today are in any way undermining public health," Jeff Stier, director of risk analysis with the National Center for Public Policy Research, told [CNSNews.com](#).

"There are a lot of things Americans can do to improve their health," he added. "Going from almost no trans fats to half of that is not really worth a public policy discussion."

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), which had pushed for the ban, [hailed](#) the FDA's move as "a public health victory."

"This is the final nail in the coffin of trans fats," CSPI executive director Michael Jacobson told the [New York Times](#). "In terms of lives saved, I think eliminating trans fats is the single most important change to our food supply."

The irony, of course, is that CSPI and likeminded groups, with the assistance of the FDA, were largely responsible for Americans' formerly high trans fat consumption. Trans fats were sold to the public as a more healthful alternative to traditional saturated fats such as butter, lard, and coconut oil.

"CSPI's 1988 book entitled 'Saturated Fat Attack' described trans fats as 'more healthful' than saturated fats, and urged Americans to switch from saturated fats such as butter to partially hydrogenated, trans-fat laden margarine for health reasons," wrote CNSNews.com.



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“The food industry,” noted Suderman, “shifted to trans fats through the 1980s and 1990s in part because of a requirement that food products with saturated fat be labeled — a requirement which, of course, was put in place by the FDA.”

As the dangers of trans fats became more widely known, pressure from consumers — perhaps aided by a 2006 FDA mandate to include trans fat content on nutrition labels — forced the food industry to remove trans fats from many of their products. Roger Lowe, a spokesman for the Grocery Manufacturers Association, told the *Times* that “the industry had already reduced trans fats added to food by more than 86 percent.” Even fast-food restaurant chains have found substitutes for the unhealthful lipids.

The FDA’s PHO ban, therefore, will have little effect on Americans’ diets or health; but that doesn’t mean it won’t affect people in other ways. PHOs — vegetable oils solidified by infusing them with hydrogen — are still used in some products, such as snack foods, cake mixes, and crackers.

Manufacturers of these products will thus have three choices: (1) convince the FDA to allow them to continue to use PHOs, an uphill battle if ever there was one; (2) discontinue the products; or (3) replace PHOs with other fats or fat substitutes, which could alter the taste and texture of the products. “The FDA estimates that it will cost the food industry between \$12 and \$14 billion to eliminate all trans fats from their products, which will be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices,” reported CNSNews.com.

Then there’s the question of just what those PHO substitutes would be.

One possibility is saturated fats. Barry Popkin, a nutrition epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told the *Times* “consumption of saturated fat in baked goods actually increased from 2005 to 2012, probably, in part, because of reductions in trans fats.” To many, this is a worrisome sign, but the evidence increasingly [suggests](#) that saturated fats are not harmful and may even be beneficial.

Alternatively, manufacturers might discover some new synthetic compounds, which might well contain trans fats or something even worse, to replace PHOs. “When the FDA began its quest to eliminate trans fats in 2013,” wrote Suderman, “the director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, who welcomed a trans fat ban, also warned in *Time* that, ‘There are other ways to manipulate fat, and we have to be careful we don’t wind up with another bad invention.’”

The fact that the FDA would have to approve these newfangled fats is of little comfort. That same agency, after all, approved and even pushed PHOs for decades. Indeed, the agency’s numerous reversals over the years should call into question the notion that so-called experts can micromanage the diets of millions of people in such a way as to ensure their health and safety.

The PHO ban has precious little to do with improving Americans’ health. All it will really do is make food cost more and possibly lead to the use of other unhealthful ingredients. It does, however, give bureaucrats the opportunity to pat themselves on the back for having done something about the (fast-diminishing) trans fat threat — and to make the case for further infringements on liberty in the name of protecting the public.

Photo of margarine with trans fat: Kagor at the Ukrainian language Wikipedia



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