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Cooked food is trans-fat free in California

By

Staff Reporter
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As of New Year's Day, California restaurateurs can no longer serve food cooked in trans fat.

Trans fat, or unsaturated fat with trans-isomer fatty acid(s), raises the low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, or LDL — the so-called “bad” cholesterol — and lowers the high-density lipoprotein cholesterol, or HDL — the “good” cholesterol — in a person's body, according to information from the Mayo Clinic. It's created when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil through a process called hydrogenation.

Shortening, margarine and processed foods can be high in trans fat, as can food cooked in trans fat. It's occasionally present naturally in dairy foods. Foods seem less greasy and have a longer shelf life when they contain trans fat. For food manufacturers, trans fats have been a boon for decades, as they're cheaper than unprocessed cooking oils.

Trans fat has been linked to heart disease, clogged arteries, diabetes, cancer, low birth weight, obesity, and immune dysfunction, according to a Vanderbilt University report.

Martinez's fast-food restaurants — the ones serving up crispy fried chicken, french fries and onion rings — say the change won't affect them because they haven't served trans fat-cooked foods in some time.

Spokespersons for McDonald's, located at 700 Court Street, Burger King at 7 Muir Road and KFC at 1170 Arnold Drive, said their menus have been in compliance for some time and said their customers didn't even notice the switch.

Linda Pheng of Lemongrass on Main Street said yesterday that because she orders her cooking oils through the distributing company Sysco, the new law did not affect her, as the Sysco had weeded out trans fat from their product line some time ago, according to her Sysco delivery person. Victoria's Café on Main Street also buys cooking supplies through Sysco, and is now trans-fat free.

Ernie Guerrero, owner of Main Street's La Tapatia, said Wednesday he phased out trans fats from his menu about a year ago, and the corn oil he uses for frying is trans fat free, as is the butter and lard used in his kitchens.

“We're healthy,” said Guerrero, adding that he too buys his supplied from Sysco, and the vendor was aware of the impending law and stopped using food items with trans fat ingredients in the past year.

According to Sysco Corporation's Position on trans fat, “Federal regulation mandates the nutrition labeling of any products containing trans fat in the retail industry. While compliance with this regulation is not currently required for the food service industry, SYSCO has taken the initiative to adhere to these regulations by requiring trans fat content be provided by the manufacturers of SYSCO brand products. Also, in partnership with our suppliers, we are making a focused effort to lower major sources of trans fat in food products.”

Pheng is confident that when her chef deep fries samosas and crispy rolls and creates stir-fry dishes, the restaurant is in compliance with the new law.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a measure in 2008 to make California the first state to forbid restaurants from serving trans fat, but the law didn't affect restaurants until Jan. 1. Bakeries have an additional year to comply with the ban.

Donna Beth Weilenman of the Benicia Herald contributed to this article.

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