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**“Fighting Fat”**

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SUSAN DENTZER: Walk down the aisle of a supermarket and you'll see shelves bulging with cookies, crackers, pound cake, margarine. Most consumers know these foods are high in fat and calories. But today, the U.S. Government warned against a particular form of fat in them, and gave Americans a new tool to help cut their consumption of it. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson:

TOMMY THOMPSON: Our department, through the Food and Drug Administration, is issuing a final rule today, requiring that all food labels include levels of trans fat, a type of fatty acid that is unhealthy. It increases the LDL, the bad part of the cholesterol that causes heart disease. Currently, nutrition labels include the saturated fat, which is another type of unhealthy fat. But we believe it is important to inform consumers of trans fats as well.

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SUSAN DENTZER: The new requirement will take effect in 2006, although Thompson said manufacturers are free to change their nutrition labels immediately.

Experts don't know what constitutes a safe level of trans fats in the diet, so no "daily value" information will have to be included as it is for other nutrients. But in general, said Thompson, given the role of trans fats in heart disease, the less of them in the diet, the better.

TOMMY THOMPSON: Heart disease is the number-one killer of both men and women in America. In 2002, heart disease had a negative economic impact of $214 billion -- that's $214 billion -- including $115 billion in direct medical costs. Bad fats like trans fats and saturated fats contribute heavily to obesity as well.

SUSAN DENTZER: Fats are acids made up of chains of carbon atoms attached to hydrogen atoms. Good dietary fats include monosaturated or polyunsaturated fats like olive oil. Bad fats include saturated fats, like those found naturally in meats and other animal products. Trans fats, by contrast, are a type of man-made fat that has been added to food products since the 1940s.

Through a process called hydrogenation, hydrogen atoms are added on opposite sides of carbon atoms in the chemical chain. Hence the word "trans," or "across." The process results in fats that are semi-solid and have a long shelf life and good flavor.

The new labeling requirement comes at a time of growing pressure on food manufacturers to make their products healthier. A flurry of lawsuits has been filed against fast-food chains like McDonald's. They've sought to hold companies accountable for failing to disclose to consumers the fat content of their products.

Last week the world's largest food manufacturer, Kraft Foods, whose products include the popular Oreos, announced it would cut the fat in its foods and shrink portion sizes. PepsiCo subsidiary Frito-lay has announced it would cut trans fats in Doritos and other popular snack brands. And just today, still another large food manufacturer, Unilever Bestfoods, said it would remove all trans fats from its best-selling margarine spread.

In an interview after today's news conference, Thompson said the government plans additional steps in the coming weeks.

TOMMY THOMPSON: We want to foster competition in this arena, and if we do this, we're going to see American ingenuity at its best. We're going to get better foods on the menus, and therefore better foods in the grocery stores, and therefore the consuming public will have better selections, healthier selections, and overall have a tendency to improve the health of all Americans.

SUSAN DENTZER: Today's announcement represents the first change in the federally mandated food labels since they were adopted in 1993.

RAY SUAREZ: For a look at how this decision may impact consumers and the food industry, we get perspectives from both sides. Michael Jacobson is the executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Iinterest, a leading consumer nutrition group that has pushed for greater regulation of trans fats and other fatty foods. And Rhona Applebaum is the executive vice president and chief science officer of the National Food Processors Association.

Will this new labeling regime, Ms. Applebaum, once it's fully phased in, make it easier to make more healthy food choices?

RHONA APPLEBAUM: The information that will soon appear on nutrition facts labels of all food products will provide consumers with an additional tool with which they can use to determine what they would like to eat and what they don't want to eat. So it's an additional tool, in terms of their nutrition education arsenal, to assist consumers in making good selections.

RAY SUAREZ: A useful move Michael?

MICHAEL JACOBSON: Absolutely. It's an important step in the right direction to help people reduce the amount of trans fat that they're getting.

There's something missing from the label as your piece indicated. It doesn't -- the new label won't put trans fat in the context of a daily diet. So if a label says three grams of trans fat, does the consumer think that's a lot or a little? Well, there's no indication of that - at least in the United States.

In Canada food labels show the amount of saturated fat, the amount of trans fat, and then the percentage of a daily limit - the daily quota that given serving of food provides. The FDA didn't see fit to go that far. But at least the information will be there and I think just having the requirement that trans fat be listed on labels will spur many food companies to make better products, to decrease the amount of trans fat.

RAY SUAREZ: Do we know how consumer responds to labeling information? Do people comparison shop labels and make food choices based upon the information contained in them?

RHONA APPLEBAUM: The nutrition facts label is a tool and for those individuals and for those consumers who want comparisons between how much certain fats are in particular products, there are consumers that do that sort of comparison shopping.

But one of the things we have to remember is that right now on the label - and it's been on the label since facts were required by law - is there's a daily value for saturated fat. One of the things the consumer needs to be always aware of is that information is there and they can make good, sound selections in terms of what their fat intake should be with the information that's currently available on the label. The addition of trans fats will be, again, another tool by which they can select a variety of foods.

RAY SUAREZ: Did your association oppose the breaking out of trans fats from total fat content listings?

RHONA APPLEBAUM: We are pleased to see that the FDA, in regards to making this decision, utilized sound science in formulating the decision that they made to include trans fats. We were not going to prejudge the science.

The NFPA is the principal scientific and technical trade association for the food industry and we want to make sure that information provided to the consumers or information that's required by law, in terms of how our industry regulated, is based on sound science. Science isn't done in a day. It took some time to determine what the weight of the scientific evidence is. The jury has decided based on the scientific methods that trans fat do result in behaviors, or I should say outcomes, similar to saturated fats. That's critical information that we need to get to the consumer, and FDA made the right decision. RAY SUAREZ: Michael Jacobson, once this is in the public sphere, is it really going to tell you much you didn't know before? Now that this number is broken out, are there food products that might look very similar in the old labeling regime that just had fat content, but now that trans fat is broken out you would see that you are actually dealing with two different products and choose accordingly?

MICHAEL JACOBSON: There will be products like that, that look pretty good now because they may have two grams of saturated fat per serving, but with the new label you'll see that they also have two grams of trans fat, meaning they are twice as bad for heart disease as you originally would have thought.

An important point is that fast foods are often fried -- Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's and so on -- have lots of trans fat. A large serving the fries, at McDonald's say, has been about as much trans fat as saturated fat. You won't learn that because they won't be labeled. There are many foods that have as much trans fat as bad saturated fat.

RAY SUAREZ: For food processors, are there acceptable substitutes? Are new products going to be in the marketplace where you'll be able to replace what trans fat does in the food processing, and the consumer won't be able to tell the difference?

RHONA APPLEBAUM: That's an excellent point that you are making, as it relates to the new reformulations that might be occurring, and the research and development that is going to occur as it relates to making sure that we meet the demands of the consumer. The consumer has high demands that they place on taste, on texture and there are certain attributes that trans fats can convey in terms of meeting those demands.

Food processors as we speak are currently looking for replacements to make sure that those types of textural taste benefits currently involved in the foods that they like, the fun foods that they like continue into the future, so, yes, you will be seeing reformulations; you will be seeing substitutions.

RAY SUAREZ: Will it be tough to do? There are some foods for which trans fat is just very handy to have because of shelf life, ease of use, that kind of thing?

RHONA APPLEBAUM: The short answer is yes. Will the industry look for new developments? Absolutely. But let's not forget the fact that consumers should not feel guilty if they consume a product that has trans fat. The industry is not saying they should consume them whole hog, without any type of reservations. Of course, they should practice moderation, balance, and variety in their diet, and that includes the foods they like very much.

But it would be a disservice to consumers to make themselves feel guilty, to beat themselves up over the fact they might consume a product they happen to enjoy every once in a while that contains trans fat.

MICHAEL JACOBSON: Well, one of problems with foods with trans fat is that they are mostly junk, junk foods - cookies, pastries, French fries, a few brands of potato chips. It's just the kind of thing we ought to be eating less of. Instead of looking for which cupcake has the least hydrogenated shortening, which is the source of trans fat and choose that one, people should be encouraged also to eat real food. Fruits, vegetables-- remember those? That's the good stuff that our diet should be based on. All the foods, with trans fat and maybe now less trans fat, are the kinds of foods we should be eating relatively little of.

Though I agree with Rhona, they are not toxic. Eating a cracker with trans fat in it is not going to kill you, but they are generally foods we ought to be eating less of.

RAY SUAREZ: We heard Secretary Thompson, in Susan Dentzer's report, say that now industry would be competing, that this would be a new arena to see who could do it with less. Given Doritos, Cheetos, and I Can't Believe It's Not Butter - I mean, is that a pretty good guess?

MICHAEL JACOBSON: That's all for the good. They are competing to make better versions of their foods. Hopefully we'll get government and maybe industry promoting real food, good foods that should provide the basis of the diet.

An example: The advertising budget -- the National Cancer Institute, has a program called five a day which is encouraging Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables, which is great. We need this. The budget is about $3 million a year. McDonald's marketing budget is over $1 billion a year. $3 million a year is chicken feed.

We really need to invest large amounts of money, several hundred million dollars a year to promote better overall diets, more whole grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, low-fat animal products, fish. And then we'll be eating less of the cookies and cupcakes and French fries with or without trans fat.

Trans fat is an important part of the battle, but it's worth putting it in context: We need to be pushing for overall better diets.

RAY SUAREZ: Michael Jacobson, Rhona Applebaum, thank you both.

RHONA APPLEBAUM: Thank you.

MICHAEL JACOBSON: Thank you.