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New Food Choices Free of Trans Fats Better Align U.S. Diets With Health Recommendations

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What Is the Issue?

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the Federal Government's quinquennial assessment of the linkage between diet and health, provides science-based advice on diet and physical activity to promote health and reduce the risk of major chronic diseases. In 2005 and 2010, that advice included the recommendation that Americans minimize their intake of trans fatty acids. While it is technically feasible to meet this goal, meeting the goal depends on consumers' willingness to make dietary changes to restrict intake of trans fats. As long as consumers are not averse to consuming food products containing trans fats, there are financial incentives for food manufacturers to continue using trans fats. Trans fats extend product shelf life and are cheaper than alternative fats.

The Federal Government has tried to create incentives for food manufacturers to reduce their use of trans fats. Federal dietary guidance provides consumers with information about the hazards of trans fats, and Federal food labeling regulations began requiring the identification of trans fats on Nutrition Facts panels in 2006. In this report, we examine whether food manufacturers are:

- reducing trans fats in foods in response to these changes.
- using trans fats-free claims on package labels as an advertising vehicle to inform consumers and increase sales.
- producing healthier foods.

What Did the Study Find?

Most new food products contain no trans fats or do not contain enough to require reporting trans fats on the Nutrition Facts panel (together described here as products free of trans fats). Further, trends over recent years show that trans fats content in food products has been falling.

- In addition to labeling trans fats content on the Nutrition Facts panel of newly introduced foods, manufacturers have voluntarily highlighted the absence of trans fats on the front of food packages.

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- Food product introductions displaying package claims about the absence of trans fats began appearing in substantial numbers in 2004 and increased every year through 2009.
- The two categories of foods where front-of-package statements appear most frequently are foods that had substantial trans fats in the past (bakery products, prepared meals, and desserts) and in foods that are nearly free of trans fats (baby food and cereals).
- Most new foods that contain no trans fats do not make package claims about the absence of trans fats.
- To calculate success rates of new products, products were deemed successful if available in at least 1 percent of the stores in our sample. Success rates for new products that contain trans fats have been about the same as for products that do not contain trans fats. However, success rates for products that are free of trans fats and that also carry the “no trans fats” front-of-package statement have been higher than for trans fats-free products that lack the “no trans fats” statement.
- New products without trans fats, including those that have front-of-package statements and those that do not have them, are likely to be lower in calories, sodium, and saturated fats than those containing trans fats. This suggests that food companies, when reformulating products to avoid trans fats, are generally substituting healthier ingredients for trans fats.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Using the Mintel Global New Products Database, we compared the average trans fats content of new food product introductions across 18 general food categories from 2006 to 2010. For five categories displaying the highest trans fats content, the average annual trans fats content from 2005 to 2010 was also tracked, where data from 2005 were lower bound estimates. Growth in all new food product introductions with a “no trans fats” claim from 2000 to 2010 was examined. Researchers also compared the extent to which “no trans fats” claims were used on product packages for the 18 food categories and several subcategories from 2004—the first year when a sizeable number of new food product introductions contained “no trans fats” claims—to 2010.

Mintel data were also aligned with data from SymphonyIRI Group (formerly Information Resources, Inc.), which tracks monthly retail sales. The combined data set allowed comparisons between success rates of new products with and without trans fats from 2006 to 2010. Among products free of trans fats, success rates for those that had a “no trans fats” claim were compared with those that did not. Information from each new product’s Nutrition Facts panel was used to compare the per-serving nutrient content (sodium, sugar, saturated fat, and calories) of products containing trans fats with those that did not contain trans fats. For new products that were eligible to make “no trans fats” claims, nutritional comparisons were also made between products that made the claim versus those that did not make the claim.