Walking down the snack aisle in the grocery store, I could almost taste the sweet goodness of my favorite Chips Ahoy chocolate chip cookies. When I was a child, there was almost nothing more enticing than the array of cookies and chips packaged in colorful, cartoon-covered boxes all along the shelves. “Can we get those?” I asked my mother, pointing to the bright blue box on the shelf. She picked up the box and turned it over to look at the ingredients. “Partially hydrogenated oil,” she read, shaking her head. My mother put the box back on the shelf, despite the look of disappointment on my face. Although I was hopeful, I was used to being denied these kinds of snacks. My mother had a rule that we were not allowed to have any foods containing partially hydrogenated oil, otherwise known as trans fat. Trans fat is a chemically altered vegetable oil that is easy to use, cheap, lasts a long time, and gives food a desirable taste, and it is a common ingredient in packaged foods. Even at a young age, I understood that trans fats were unhealthy to consume, but I never understood why trans fats were still so commonly in use if they could be harmful. It seemed to me, even at a young age, that the use of trans fats was inherently wrong — harmful chemicals should not be put intentionally into food.

As I grew older, I learned more about the complexity of the food industry and how trans fats continued to impact the majority of Americans. Companies sought to enlarge their monetary gain by increasing the shelf life of their products, a goal they achieved through the use of trans fats (“Trans Fats”). In 1911, Crisco vegetable shortening became the first of many manufactured food products to contain trans fats. However, by the 1980’s, the use of trans fats became much more prevalent as consumer advocacy groups, in a campaign against the use of saturated fat,
pushed fast-food companies to begin using partially hydrogenated oils containing trans fats for frying. These consumer advocacy groups believed that trans fats were much healthier than saturated fats. Originally, little was known about the consequences of trans fats, but research conducted during the 1990’s proved they are associated with many adverse health effects (“A History of Trans Fat”). According to Marian Jarlenski and Colleen L. Barry from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, one of these implications is the direct link between trans fats and cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the United States (Jarlenski and Barry 209). The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) claims that most Americans consume about 4.7 pounds of artificial trans fats per year, while the American Heart Association recommends consuming less than 1.6 pounds per year (McTaggart, 21). In spite of the scientifically proven harm that trans fats can cause, the use of trans fats in processed foods has not declined over the years. According to Meir Stampfer, Walter Willett and Alberto Ascherio from the Harvard School of Public Health, many products, including most baked goods and fried fast foods, are still made with partially hydrogenated fat and are high in trans fat content (Ascherio).

This paper explores the policies that have already been implemented by the food industry, local governments, and other countries to limit the use and intake of trans fats, and then assesses the effectiveness of these policies. I begin by considering the nature of the problem, the actions that have been taken by health advocates and the food industry itself, as well as the role the media has played in creating awareness of the issue. I then shift my focus to a discussion about why national government regulation of the food industry is the best way to ensure the safety of its ingredients and what exactly must be done in order for companies to start providing safe and healthy food to consumers. After considering the implications of trans fat use and the
ineffectiveness of previous strategies for controlling them, I argue that only federal regulation, supported by continued public education, will truly be successful in improving the health and safety of American diets.

Artificial trans fats were originally developed to replace the use of natural animal fats, which became a health concern in the 1970’s (McTaggart 19). However, a concern with trans fats arose in 1990 when Onno Korver and Martijn Katan’s study showed that trans fats reduce high- and increase low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, the type of cholesterol associated with increased heart disease (Korver and Katan 275). People began to question the safety of trans fat use in food. The combined effort of the media and nutritional research influenced Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch multinational consumer goods company, to make the decision to remove trans fats from their retail products in 1994 (Korver and Katan 276). Unilever’s quick response to the harmful effects of trans fats triggered other companies worldwide to follow their lead. Once the use of trans fats became an international public concern, governments worldwide became involved (Korver and Katan 276).

The US government initially addressed the trans fat issue in 1999. The FDA proposed a rule, which took effect in 2006, requiring that trans fats must be listed on nutritional labels separately from other types of fat (Jarlenski and Barry 212). The label requirement was expected to positively affect food choices of consumers and save several thousand lives in the US per year. However, loopholes in the label requirements allowed companies to claim zero grams of trans fats if there are fewer than .5 grams per serving (Moss 58). Additionally, in 2008, various states and cities in the US created bills to restrict trans fat use in restaurants. New York City was the nation’s first jurisdiction to enact such legislation, but other administrations including the state of California soon followed. Unfortunately, the federal label change and local restaurant
regulations did not have a significant limiting effect on the public’s trans fat consumption (Jarlenski and Barry 214). The trans fat ban from restaurants was most likely ineffective because although it prevented restaurants from adding trans fats to their own food, it did not prevent them from using ingredients that already contained the hydrogenated oil (Eckel et al. 2238).

More recently, health advocates, using the media as a pulpit, have argued that the labeling and restaurant efforts were not enough because packaged food companies have continued to use trans fats (Jarlenski and Barry 212). Consumer education through the use of the media prompted many companies to voluntarily alter their products and public education led by health advocates pressured the government to take further action. On November 7, 2013, the FDA announced their intention to take further regulatory steps to reduce the United States consumption of trans fats, by enforcing strict limits on its use by food companies (Burgess 1).

Although some critics claim that the proposed regulation of trans fats will force companies in the food industry to switch to more expensive alternatives, I support the government’s proposition to take action. According to Tom Neltner, an analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C., “our food supply has become more diverse and more processed and is produced farther away from where it is consumed than it was 50 years ago” (Neltner et al 356). Products such as palm, coconut and other vegetable oils are more natural, healthier, and readily available alternatives to trans fats. I argue that government regulation is the only way to ensure a reduction of the consumption of trans fats and subsequently decrease the prevalence of cardiovascular disease and high cholesterol in the United States. In addition, I also propose continuing and increasing the use of public education campaigns on food additives and other health related topics in order to provide the public with the necessary tools to make educated decisions about what they eat.
The proposed FDA trans fat ban will require companies in the food industry to switch to alternative ingredients in order to improve the health of American citizens. Although many companies currently continue to use trans fats in their products due to their low cost and accessibility, some companies have already taken the initiative and voluntarily chosen to reduce the trans fat content in their products by replacing partially hydrogenated oils with more natural oils (Jarlenkski and Barry 213). This initiative has demonstrated that the switch to alternatives can be attainable without inflicting a burden on the industry.

While supporters of the proposed regulation believe that the intended benefits of the legislation outweigh the costs, critics believe that the government regulation will impose great economic costs on both the producers and the consumers. Two such people opposed to trans fat regulation are Paul Wassel from the University of Chester, UK, and Dr. Niall Young, scientist at Dupont Nutrition and Health in Denmark. They explain that trans fat regulation will require companies in the food industry to “hunt down more and more exotic and novel sources of raw materials” (Wassel and Young 515). I dispute this claim because existing available alternatives including naturally stable oils, trait-enhanced oils, and processing techniques can be used to replace trans fats (McTaggart 21). These replacements demonstrate that there are several alternative options for companies to use instead of trans fats.

These alternatives may be more expensive than trans fats, but the switch will not, as critics often claim, cause companies to collapse. Steen Stender, Jørn Dyerberg, and Arne Astrup from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, discovered in 2006 that the trans fat content of McDonald’s servings varied widely across countries, from less than one gram in Denmark and China, to ten grams in the United States - in the same food item. If McDonald’s could maintain their growing global franchise while providing entire countries with trans fat-reduced products,
all without significantly altering the taste of the product, then it seems logical that they should be able to provide this kind of reduction to all of their locations. In a separate study by Astrup, it was discovered that the reason Denmark’s McDonald’s restaurants have lower trans fat content is that Denmark’s government enacted legislation in 2003, banning any food with a trans fat content greater than 2% of total fat, which forced McDonald’s to comply (Astrup 44). The Denmark legislation demonstrates that food-related companies, even those seemingly dependent on trans fats in their ingredients, will be able to adapt.

Denmark provides a model of the kind of legislation that may work in the United States as well. Denmark began taking action in 1994 when the first report by the Danish Nutrition Council (DNC) was released. This report concluded that trans fats produce numerous health problems such as thrombosis and atherosclerosis, and that it is a threat to adults, infants, and fetuses (Astrup 43). It was recommended that trans fats should be removed from foods in Denmark within a few years (Astrup 43). In addition, the DNC wrote to the major fast food chains, as well as to politicians in Denmark, requesting that food suppliers reduce the level of trans fats in their cooking oil. They further pressured the industry through the use of the media. As a result of these efforts by the DNC, legislation was enforced beginning June 1, 2003, restricting the industrially-produced trans fat content of all food products to a maximum of 2% of the total fat content (Astrup 44). Following legislation, the trans fat content in a high trans fat menu in Denmark was successfully reduced from 20-30 grams to less than 1 gram. Additionally, the coronary mortality in Denmark has fallen 70% and it continues to fall (Maron 2). By following in the footsteps of our advanced counterparts in Denmark and taking similar steps toward legislation, the United States should be able to significantly decrease our citizens’ consumption of trans fats and subsequently minimize the prevalence of heart disease.
Another critic, David Resnik, a bioethicist at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, argues that the increased price of production without trans fats would most likely increase the price of the product to consumers, ultimately burdening low income people who cannot afford more expensive food (Resnik, 30). Although this concern is reasonable, the success of Denmark’s legislative intervention has proven that trans fat reduction can be done without any noticeable effect on the availability, price or quality of food items previously containing high amounts of trans fats (Stender, Dyerberg and Astrup 158). In addition, Stender, Dyerberg, and Astrup explain that low-income groups are already most at risk of coronary heart disease and may also more commonly eat foods with a high trans fat content; for these at-risk citizens, reducing the intake of trans fat can improve their health and reduce their healthcare expenses (Stender, Dyerberg and Astrup 157). Therefore, government intervention will work to help, rather than to burden, those who are already more at risk.

The use of public education campaigns will further promote overall health in America because these campaigns will increase consumer awareness of the risks associated with unhealthy foods such as those high in trans fat. According to Sunitha Jasti and Szilvia Kovacs’ 2008 survey, 73% of consumers were aware of a link between trans fat and cardiovascular disease, but only 21% could name three food sources of trans fat (Jasti and Kovacs 310). If most people do not know which food sources contain trans fats, then they will be unable to effectively avoid consuming trans fat. However, the fact that 73% of consumers are aware of a link between trans fat and cardiovascular disease shows that progress has been made in educating the public. In addition, according to Jasti and Kovac’s later 2010 study, people who do not read trans fat labels were three to four times more likely to have high consumption of food high in trans fats (Jasti and Kovacs 311). This study indicates that people who are educated about health issues
and practices like label-reading make healthier decisions in the long run. This evidence leads me to believe that ignorance is a prominent contributor to current health issues in America and education is needed, in addition to government regulation, in order to make a positive impact.

Part of Denmark’s success was due to the fact that they lead an overall healthier lifestyle than that of the majority of Americans. In Dina Fine Maron’s interview with Steen Stender, one of the leading Danish trans fat experts, Stender explained his belief that the significant fall in coronary heart disease is the combined result of the reduction in trans fats as well as Denmark’s heavy anti-smoking campaigns and promotion of eating fruits and exercising (Maron 2). In addition to requiring the US industry to naturalize the production of food, I believe that the American people need to take it upon themselves to instill a healthier lifestyle like that of Denmark. American citizens can limit their own risk for cardiovascular disease and improve their overall health by checking labels and avoiding trans fats. If a notable number of people stop buying food from companies who use trans fats, these companies will be forced to eliminate trans fats from their products in order to regain customers and make a profit. By further promoting healthy eating and exercise, and simply refraining from destructive activities such as smoking, the high rate of coronary heart disease in the US will significantly decrease.

The bulk of the evidence suggests that, without inflicting additional significant costs on American consumers, legislation limiting trans fat will promote public health by reducing the effects of cardiovascular disease. The FDA estimates cutting the use of trans fat in America could prevent 20,000 heart attacks and 7,000 deaths each year (Hayes 1). Other countries, like Denmark, have already seen similar success. After considering the success of Denmark’s regulation on trans fats, it has become clear to me that only federal regulation supported by
continued public education will truly be successful in improving the dietary health and safety of Americans.

Walking through the grocery store today, shelves remain stocked with an abundance of packaged foods that contain trans fats. Before I buy any food product, I am conscious of reading labels to ensure the words “hydrogenated oil” are not found in the ingredients. However, most people are unaware of the fact that they should be taking this precaution or merely do not have the patience to scour through those long lists of ingredients. Food companies need to change their recipes in order to put an end to the prevalence of trans fats. The FDA’s proposed legislation to regulate trans fats is one step in a larger process of developing healthier American habits surrounding food choices and personal practices. Although it will take time for the US to diminish heart disease, regulating trans fats will put us on the path towards a healthier society.

Works Cited


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