



The last newsletter talked about some of the 'super foods' out there and the wonderful things they can do for you. This month we are going to discuss the opposite end of the spectrum, the artificial concoctions that bear no resemblance to what Mother Nature intended us to have.

Trans-fats

I'm sure most people have heard of trans-fats (also known as trans fatty acids) but what are they? They are created in an industrial process that adds hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils to make them more solid at room temperature and to give them better physical properties for food processing, such as increased shelf-life. Food manufacturers like using trans -fats in their foods because they're easy to use, inexpensive to produce and last a long time. They also give foods a desirable taste and texture.



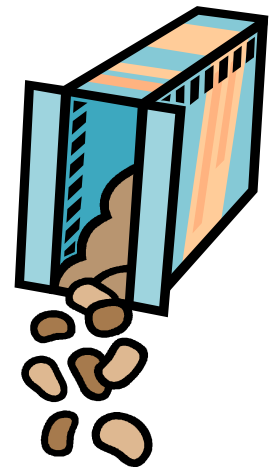
That's why all of those biscuits sitting in the supermarket just waiting for you to buy them can sit there for months and still taste delicious (depending on what you define as 'delicious' of course). The wafers in those Tim Tims are nice and crisp, the cream in the Monte Carlos tastes so rich and soft and those shortbread biscuits snap in half just as they would if you just got them out of the oven. The same goes for pastries, doughnuts, frozen meals and frozen desserts.

Trans-fats are also in the oils used by fast food restaurants because they can be used over and over and over again. The beauty of this stuff for food manufacturers is that they don't have to label them. In Australia, nutrition panels only have to tell you how much overall fat there is and then break it down into saturated and unsaturated but they don't tell you how much trans-fats there are. In America, of all places however, new labelling laws are forcing manufacturers to put the trans-fat content onto food labels causing all sorts of consternation because it is now revealing just how much of this stuff is in processed foods. On the positive side this is also causing manufacturers to look for substances to replace trans-fats but they are finding it very difficult to find something that gives them the same texture, consistency and shelf-life.

It's also associated with a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes. How? When trans fats are absorbed into cell membranes they create abnormal body chemistry, which can cause fat deposits in the arteries, liver and other organs, potentially leading to heart attack, stroke or circulatory occlusion. Nice!



But so what, you may ask. What's wrong with this stuff? If it makes food taste better isn't that a good thing? Well, maybe not. Trans fats raise your bad (LDL) cholesterol levels and lower your good (HDL) cholesterol levels. Eating trans fats increases your risk of developing heart disease and stroke.



Eating as little as 5g a day increases the risk of heart disease by as much as 25% - a donut contains about 4 to 9 grams of trans fat and about half the fat in a cookie or biscuit is trans fat. I don't have any figures for foods that are deep fried in trans fats in fast food restaurants but I'm guessing it would be more than 5g! So is there a safe level? Meat naturally contains trans fats but the amount, if you consume a healthy, balanced diet, would be about 2g and being naturally occurring, does not have the same adverse effect. The key word in the sentence above is 'balanced'. Consuming any processed or fast food tips the balance so put simply - don't eat anything processed or packaged and keep it real!

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Low fat foods

When I talk to people about food and nutrition the most difficult concept for people to grasp is when I tell them to eat full-fat. Yes, shock and horror, the whole FULL-FAT. Eat full-fat cheese, yoghurt, milk and not the imitation foods they make out of them. The reason for this is that mainly, these foods are meant to be eaten whole and when they are you don't have to eat as much of them to keep you full, unlike the low fat stuff which doesn't fill you up so you eat twice as much consuming more calories than you need to.



These low fat foods, and now I'm including things like muesli bars, frozen meals, condiments and dressings, are also dangerous because they are pumped up with extra carbohydrates to make up for the lack of flavour i.e. fat. These extra carbohydrates mean these foods are higher in sugar leading to increased insulin levels in those that consume too much of them. The so called experts have been telling the Western world to consume a diet low in fat for the past 40 or so years. Is it a coincidence that populations in Canada, USA, Australia and Western Europe are fatter than they ever were?



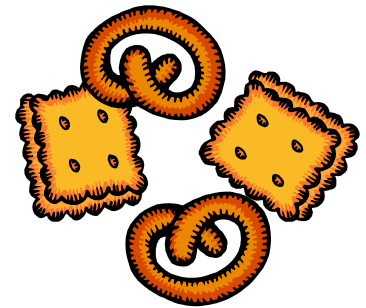
Artificial sweeteners

As part of the whole low-fat con people were also told to watch those calories. So instead of having sugar people were told that it was better to have the low-calorie substitutes - Splenda and Nutrasweet, Equal. Since too much sugar was bad for you the food corporations, in the interests of consumer health of course, decided to add these substances to replace sugar. We now have 'diet' soft drinks that have no sugar, so drink up! Which people did and soft drink consumption went through the roof, as did obesity levels. Of course when you're on a good thing you don't stop at one product so these sweeteners were also included in many other foods - cookies, chocolate, chewing gum, low-carb foods, diet foods, ready-made meals, salad dressings, vitamins, yoghurts, chips, hot chocolate - to name a few. What's the connection between this stuff and obesity and other health problems?



A study published in the International Journal of Obesity in July 2004 showed that eating artificially sweetened foods and drinking sweetened beverages might hinder your body's ability to estimate calorie intake, thus boosting your inclination to overindulge. Sounds familiar!

Some studies are also pointing to sucralose (Splenda) being responsible for: decreased red blood cells, decreases in thyroid function, enlarged colon, enlarged liver and brain, shrunken ovaries, increased cataracts, abnormal liver cells. None of these are conclusive of course and these studies were on animals, so says the manufacturer, but more people are actually exhibiting a lot of these symptoms. Do you really want to risk it for the sake of a bit of a sweet taste?



The main message you should take away from all of this is that a healthy and balanced diet negates the need to have foods with trans-fats, that are low-fat and have artificial sweeteners. You shouldn't feel the need to have a junk food blow out if you're eating well because you just want won't to have that stuff in your body. You shouldn't feel the need to have soft drinks because you are drinking enough water to keep hydrated. You shouldn't feel the need to use artificial sweeteners because your consumption of fresh fruit satisfies your desire for sweetness. Right?

Anna

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