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# War on fat: California trans-fat ban goes into effect Friday

Jim Sanders  
Sacramento Bee

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SACRAMENTO — California will bar restaurants from cooking with trans fat beginning New Year's Day, becoming the first state to crack down on the substance tied to clogged arteries, strokes and coronary heart disease.

The ban is hailed by supporters as a way to protect diners who routinely have not been aware of consuming trans fat at some restaurants because they don't see the meals cooked or the ingredients used.

"Consumers should rejoice because they can actually take family and friends out to eat and not worry about whether food will be cooked in trans fat," said Assemblyman Tony Mendoza, D-Artesia, who proposed the ban.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the measure in 2008, but it will take effect Friday because restaurants were given a one-year adjustment period. Bakeries need not comply until January 2011.

Schwarzenegger, upon signing Mendoza's Assembly Bill 97, hailed it as "taking a strong step toward creating a healthier future."

California previously had barred trans fat in preparing food for schools.

Trans fat is created when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil, a process called hydrogenation meant to improve the shelf life and enhance the flavor of foods.

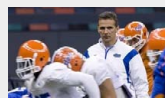
The process turns liquid oils into solid fats, such as shortening or stick margarine, which have been used in french fries, baked goods, crackers, candies, snack foods, fried foods and other items.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not restrict trans fat but says it can increase the risk of coronary heart disease by raising low-density lipoprotein — or bad cholesterol.

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"You kind of get a double whammy – your bad cholesterol increases and your good cholesterol decreases," said Dr. Diane Sobkowicz, a cardiologist who directs the Women's Heart Program for the Sutter Heart and Vascular Institute.

The American Heart Association recommends limiting trans fat to less than 1 percent of total calories consumed daily.

Responding to health concerns, many restaurants had been reducing or eliminating trans fats even before passage of Mendoza's bill last year.

The New Year's Day deadline poses no major problem, said Daniel Conway, spokesman for the California Restaurant Association.

"This was an ingredient that was already being phased out, for the most part," he said. "I think most restaurants have had adequate time to comply."

McDonald's, Burger King, Rubio's and KFC, also known as Kentucky Fried Chicken, are among fast-food chains that do not cook with trans fats, officials said.

Larry Rusinko, Rubio's spokesman, said the firm made the change long ago without raising prices or sacrificing taste.

"We chose the zero-trans-fat canola oil because we thought it actually enhanced the flavor and quality of our products," he said.

KFC spokeswoman Laurie Schalow said the company chose a soybean-oil blend as a substitute and "we had it in stores for months and months and no one noticed."

Members of the chain's franchise board conducted an internal taste test on the old and new oils. "It was like, half picked one, half picked the other – they couldn't tell the difference," Schalow said.

Mai Pham, owner of Sacramento's Lemon Grass and La Bou restaurants, said she does not use trans fat at either one. Restaurants statewide are responding to demand for healthier products, she said.

"I would venture to say it's quite hard, after that law was signed, to go buy something with trans fat," Pham said of restaurants. "Everyone is switching."

California's new ban on restaurant oils, margarines and shortenings containing more than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving will be monitored by routine restaurant inspections already conducted by local health departments. Violators can be fined up to \$1,000.

The California Restaurant Association opposed the legislation, contending that 75 percent of meals are consumed at home and that banning trans fats in restaurants would have no major impact on health statewide. Causes of obesity and heart risk extend far beyond restaurant kitchens into areas of personal food choices – portions, calories, carbohydrates – that are not affected by AB 97, the trade group says.

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