



THE PLAIN DEALER

NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

Trans-fatty acids on labels, but remember calories, too

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My question concerns the amount of fat on labels. The label reads "Total Fat - 10 grams," then proceeds to list the fats, i.e. trans fat, saturated fat, mono fat, etc., with the amount of each fat. So you add up all the fats listed, and they don't come even near the 10 grams . . . so where are they? Or maybe more importantly: What fats are they, and why aren't they listed?

- GK

As you might know, Food and Drug Administration labeling regulations were changed in January to require for the first time that trans-fatty acids be listed on food labels. Labels are required to list cholesterol, total fat, saturated fat and trans fat.

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are still not required, unless the label makes a claim about fatty acids or cholesterol, such as "high in monounsaturated fat" or "cholesterol-free." If monounsaturated fat is listed, polyunsaturated fats must be also, and vice versa. Manufacturers also will list them where there is consumer interest (for example, on oils and margarines) and where it makes them look good.

Where all fat components are listed (saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and trans fatty acids) the total grams should approximate the total fat in the food serving. Where it doesn't, it's likely to be due to rounding issues. For a given type of fat, amounts below 5 grams are rounded to the nearest 0.5 gram; above 5 grams, fats are rounded to the nearest gram.

So, for example, a margarine might have 2.5 grams saturated fat, 0 grams trans fat, 4 grams polyunsaturated fat and 2.5 grams mono fat (equaling a total of 9 grams) but be labeled with a total of 10 grams of fat, due to rounding.

With all the focus on trans-fatty acids, it's important not to get distracted from other issues, such as serving sizes, calories and saturated fat. When reading a label, add the grams of saturated and trans fat together to make comparisons between products. And check out the total fat and calories, if that's an issue for you, as it is for two-thirds of Americans.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of University of Akron. Her column runs on alternating weeks in Taste. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com

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