E-Reserve Article Summary

“The Provision of Trans Fat Information and its Interaction with Consumer Knowledge”

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FNES 106 – Professor Tietje
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The article in The Journal of Consumer Affairs written by John Kozup, Scot Burton, and Elizabeth H. Creyer titled “The Provision of Trans Fat Information and Its Interaction with Consumer Knowledge” describes the relatively recent addition of trans fat information to the Nutrition Facts panel, as well as research conducted to judge the strengths and weaknesses in manipulated methods of advertising, education, perception and knowledge this change will provide the consumer, specifically “this research examines whether this modification may have a significant effect on consumers’ disease risk perceptions and on the perceived importance of trans fat information.” The general concern of the article is that effects of this modification may be limited if the consumer does not receive the education necessary to “enhance knowledge and understanding.”

Research into the isolated topic of trans fat in the American diet “identified certain dietary choices as contributors to the development of cardiovascular disease; among these are foods containing trans-fatty acids, or trans fat.” They define trans fat as formed from liquid (hydrogenated) oils that are transformed into solid fats. These trans fats are found in foods such as shortening and hard margarine which have partially hydrogenated vegetable oils or saturated fats which show links to premature coronary heart disease causing deaths due to trans fat’s “dangerous artery-clogging properties” and increasing levels of the “bad cholesterol,” low-density lipoprotein.

“Consumer groups such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest have called for food manufacturers and restaurants to eliminate trans fat from their products, and lawsuits pertaining to both the production and disclosure of trans fat content have been initiated” against Kraft Foods for Oreo cookies, and McDonald’s. The article also states the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has taken steps to inform the public of the danger posed by trans fat consumption recommending in its 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans to “Consume 10 percent of calories from saturated fatty acids and less than 300 mg/day of cholesterol, and keep trans-fatty acid consumption as low as possible (United States Department of Agriculture 2005).”

Along with mandated laws guiding product labeling include trans fat content in grams per serving, and lawsuits establishing precedent for further pursuit of the elimination and content of consumable products, consumer knowledge has increased relevant to “specific nutrients associated with a higher incidence of disease.”

However researchers still ask the question, “can an education effort increase the salience of trans fat information and moderate the effect of trans fat level on consumers’ disease risk-related perceptions?” Research studies were conducted in which information given and consumer knowledge were manipulated to conclude results of the effects of the Nutrition Facts panels, advertising, and education.
“In general, the results show that for consumers exposed to information on consumption of foods high in \textit{trans} fat, estimates of the perceived risk of disease increase.” The results concluded that “the effectiveness of \textit{trans} fat information provision is improved when consumers are informed about the health risks associated with \textit{trans} fat consumption,” but when faced with making decisions concerning foods which contain \textit{trans} fat “consumers have not yet grasped the importance.”

I learned a great deal surrounding the education, knowledge, awareness, perception and utilization of such knowledge where nutrition and general health of consumers is concerned. The education of such knowledge, the different methods of spreading awareness, and which manners are effective, are directly related to the consumer’s individual perception and how they will utilize this gain in future use and purchases of consumer goods. Without the awareness and knowledge of nutrition and its relation to the consumer, limitations are drastically impeding the consumer, health risks increase, and prevention of diseases correlated to dietary choices decreases.

This information is directly relevant to my future career as a dietitian because it pertains to the nutritional or dietary education of the consumer, which is a general description of a portion of the tasks which a dietitian performs. A dietitian guides the consumer or client to make choices using information and knowledge we provide. My future career path also demonstrates an active interest in the bettering of government mandated labeling of nutritional goods, and this article included descriptions of those pursuits and successes by which laws were mandated and precedents were established via lawsuits to ensure the continuing education and dietary safety of the consumer.