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King County restaurants told to phase out trans fats

By [CHERIE BLACK](#), Seattle P-I REPORTER, July 20, 2007

Joining what appears to be a national trend in the wake of the obesity epidemic, the King County Board of Health told county restaurants Thursday to phase out trans fats and voted to require chain restaurants to provide nutritional information for all menu items. The new rules, opposed by the restaurant industry as too costly, were adopted after about six hours of discussion and comments from members of the public, most of whom supported the rules.

The labeling requirement calls for all chain restaurants -- those with at least 10 branches nationwide -- to list calories, saturated fat, carbohydrates and sodium in each regular food item they serve. Restaurants have until Aug. 1, 2008, to comply. Under the trans fat rule, all foods containing artificial trans fats would have to be off the menu by Feb. 1, 2009. The process will be in two phases. Fry oils and shortenings with artificial trans fats will not be permissible after April 1, 2008. Restaurants must find alternatives for margarine and all other products containing trans fats by Feb. 1, 2009.

The board agreed to re-examine the issue four months before the 2009 deadline to see if full compliance is practical and alternatives are available. "The Board of Health is responsible for passing laws to protect the health of the public, and to promote healthy behaviors that improve health and prevent illness," Board of Health Chairwoman Julia Patterson said. "There is no better example of our commitment to residents' health than the legislation passed today that protects us from dangerous trans fats and promotes consumer education and informed choices by labeling menus."

Trans fat is made when manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oil -- a process called hydrogenation -- which increases the shelf life and flavor of foods. The fats have been linked to obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

The health department and the Washington Restaurant Association have been debating the proposals for nearly a year. The association opposed both mandates, saying that most restaurants in the area had already eliminated trans fats from foods and that menu labeling wouldn't be effective without consumer education. Plus, the association said it would cost too much for restaurants to relabel menus because the health department won't help pay for it. The department insisted the cost would be significantly less than what restaurant owners have cited.

Blame and accusations were lobbed back and forth during the more than two hours the public was allowed to speak before the board Thursday. "I don't want you to be my mom, I don't want you to ask restaurants to do something that's impossible," restaurant owner Chris Clifford said about menu labeling during his allotted two minutes. Lane Hoss, vice president of marketing for

Anthony's, parent of Anthony's HomePort and other restaurants, brought a sample of what the restaurant's new menus could look like if the proposal was passed. The large, extended menu was about double the pages of the original menu.

Nevertheless, menu labeling passed unanimously after much discussion by the board, which adopted seven amendments to the legislation. One of those applied **the labeling to items that are on a menu for 60 days or more, instead of 30 -- an attempt to save restaurants the cost of labeling items on seasonal menus**. Many accused the board of targeting restaurants and ignoring schools, where food should also be nutritious, when childhood obesity rates are high. Patterson said the board would begin looking at school nutrition before the end of the year.

Earlier this month, New York City became the first in the nation to begin implementing a trans fat ban. Fast-food restaurants in **New York City** also must post calories on their menu, a rule that sparked a federal lawsuit by the New York Restaurant Association. Patterson said King County's legislation shouldn't generate any lawsuits. **Massachusetts'** restaurant association said last week that it wouldn't fight that state's proposed trans fat ban. **Philadelphia**, the Boston suburb of **Brookline** and **Montgomery County, Md.**, have implemented bans that take effect next year. **Miami** and **Chicago** are among other governments considering trans fat bans.

The regulations will be enforced by restaurant inspectors and included in their regular inspections, Patterson said. Restaurants that don't comply will receive points against them. "This legislation is being driven by an obesity epidemic," Patterson said. "This is a very important element in helping to end that." Added David Fleming, director and health officer for Public Health -- Seattle & King County, "With the menu labeling requirement, the board has taken a significant step ... to enable us to make more informed choices about the food we eat ... the elimination of artificial trans fat is great news for preventing heart disease and improving the health of our community."

THE NEW RULES

- No artificial trans fats at restaurants in the county by Feb. 1, 2009.
- Nutritional information on chain restaurant menus by Aug. 1, 2008.