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Q & A; The Fats in Nuts

By C. CLAIBORNE RAY

Q. Is it true that the "good oil" in nuts turns to a trans fat when the nuts are roasted?

A. No, said Christina Stark, a nutritionist with the division of nutritional sciences at Cornell University. "Roasting nuts doesn't create any significant trans fat."

Some trans fat is produced by ruminant animals, Ms. Stark said, and so ends up in butter and meat. But most of the trans fat we eat comes from a manufacturing process in which liquid vegetable oil gets hydrogenated, in the presence of a metal catalyst, so that its chemical structure more closely resembles a saturated fat. The body treats this partially hydrogenated fat like a saturated fat, raising the risk of heart disease.

Nuts are obviously high in fat, she said, but mostly the "good" kind, either monounsaturated or polyunsaturated.

"The fat content of an ounce of nuts ranges from 13 to 21 grams," Ms. Stark said, "and of this total, perhaps 1 or 2 grams is saturated, the cholesterol-raising kind of fat."

Nuts provide a good kind of fat, protein, calories, micronutrients and taste, Ms. Stark continued, and their chief dietary risk is simply that they are very rich in calories.

"In general nuts are high in the healthy fats, but they are still fats," she said. "Fat has 9 calories per gram, and carbohydrates and proteins each have 4 calories per gram, so fat has more than twice as many calories as the same weight of other foods." C. CLAIBORNE RAY