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WESTCHESTER MORE THAN DOUBLES NUMBER OF TRANS-FAT FREE RESTAURANTS ON ITS WEBSITE

Over 350 restaurants have now taken the pledge to cook without trans-fats

Japanese, Chinese, Argentinean, Greek; these are just some examples of the types of cuisines that are now available among more than 350 Westchester restaurants that have joined Westchester County's Be Fit Westchester campaign.

"During the past few weeks, we have more than doubled the number of restaurants signing on to this program," said County Executive Andy Spano. "With the help of the Restaurant Association, local restaurateurs have pledged to work with us to provide healthier food for their customers. As the word gets out, we expect many more food service establishments to get on board."

Last July, before New York City enacted its ban on trans-fats and before large fast-food companies pledged to remove trans-fats from their products, Westchester County started a voluntary program. Those restaurants who agreed to cook with oils that didn't contain trans-fats would be publicized on a special county website, and receive placards designating the restaurant as a Be Fit Westchester establishment.

More than 140 restaurants joined initially, but a recent push in partnership with the Restaurant Association of Westchester/Rockland swelled the ranks of the restaurants signing on.

"People these days are very clued into their bodies and their health," said County Executive Andy Spano. "They want to know what they are eating and restaurants out there are getting the message. Our trans-fat website is a way for them to let their customers know that they are part of this revolution in the food industry."

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As part of its Be Fit Westchester program, the county launched the trans-fats program to help encourage healthy eating.

“The number of overweight and obese people in Westchester has been dramatically increasing,” said Joshua Lipsman, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “If this trend is not reversed, the health consequences may be disastrous. Excessive quantities of dietary trans-fat can be especially damaging to one’s health, and members of the public need to pay closer attention to the amounts of trans-fat contained in the foods they eat.”

Trans-fat, also known as trans-fatty acid, is formed when vegetable oils are processed to harden them into shortening. It is commonly found in vegetable shortenings and some margarine, as well as in many foods made with or cooked in those fats. Fried foods tend to be especially high in trans-fat. French fries contain about 40 percent trans-fat and donuts contain about 35 percent.

Unfortunately, trans-fat can increase levels of “bad” LDL cholesterol in the body and reduce levels of “good” HDL cholesterol. That can lead to an increased risk of heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in Westchester. According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, coronary heart disease affects over 12.5 million Americans and claims a half-million lives each year. Trans-fat may also increase the risk of type-2 diabetes and other serious health problems.

Restaurants commonly use cooking oils containing high levels of trans-fat, rather than healthier oils, because they tend to be cheaper and may prolong the shelf life of some products. Many people have become accustomed to the taste of food cooked with high levels of trans-fat and may take time to adjust.

For these reasons, an estimated 60 percent of commercial food service operators continue to use high trans-fat cooking oils in food preparation despite the health warnings.

The Health Department has been encouraging restaurants in the County to sign a pledge agreeing to avoid the use of cooking oils containing trans-fat. Those making the pledge are authorized to post a notice in the establishment identifying its involvement in the program. The name of the establishment is also listed on the Health Department website at:<http://www.westchestergov.com/health/TransFat/TF.htm>

Local restaurateurs are discovering that long-term benefits of participation can far outweigh short-term losses, if any.

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"We recently switched to Elitra; a trans-fat free oil that has been a great success," said Jay Lippin, chef at Mighty Joe Young's restaurant in Hartsdale. "This new oil is actually cheaper to use because it doesn't break down as easily, so it lasts longer. We want our customers to have a great dining experience, and using the best ingredients in preparing our foods is part of that. When the County reached out to us, we were really excited about participating in this program because it's something we really believe in," he said.

In 2005, the Westchester County Health Department added a new module on trans-fat to its pre-licensing training course for food service managers. Participants are educated on the health risks of trans-fat and are given suggestions for reducing trans-fat use. Following the course, managers are invited to participate in a collaborative program to explore ways to further decrease dietary trans-fat.

For more information, please call the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000, or visit the Health Department web site at www.westchestergov.com/health.