Say cheese: Not all trans fats are bad for you, review finds

Dr. Spencer Proctor, director of the U of A's Metabolism and Cardiovascular Disease Laboratory, says natural and synthetic trans fats should not be lumped together on nutrition labels.

EDMONTON - There's a difference between cookies and coles when it comes to trans fats, said a University of Alberta researcher calling for a change to the way food products are labelled.

A scientific review co-authored by Dr. Spencer Proctor, director of the university's metabolomics and cardiovascular disease laboratory, found that naturally occurring trans fats in dairy products and meat are different from the widely mislabelled synthetic variety found in shortening and fried foods.

Restricted by the food industry to increase shelf life and add flavour, synthetic trans fats have been found to be particularly bad for cardiovascular health.

The review, featured in the July issue of Advances in Nutrition — published by the American Society for Nutrition — suggested that natural trans fats, on the other hand, may be good for your heart.

'Veve lumped all trans fats in the same basket,' Proctor said. 'We really have to treat these two families of trans fats differently.'

Presently, nutrition labels in Canada make no differentiation between natural and synthetic trans fats. When a shopper picks up a block of cheese or a bar of chocolate, they see an amount of trans fat listed on the label, even though 'hardly any' is synthetic, Proctor said.

'It may mislead the public,' he said, adding that shoppers who bypass these products in favour of their low-fat counterparts miss out on nutrients such as calcium, as well as potential benefits to cardiovascular health.

Early research has suggested that natural trans fats are similar to polyunsaturated fats and can reduce weight gain, cholesterol and may have anti-inflammatory benefits, Proctor said. His research in this area has been supported by the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency, Alberta Milk and the Dairy Farmers of Canada.

The simplest remedy, Proctor said, is to include only synthetic trans fats on nutrition labels, something that's already done in Europe. Since the information included on food labels is determined by Health Canada.