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Fat substitutes backfire, researchers say

By Dan Hurley

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Fake fat products intended to wean people off the real thing are doomed to backfire because they keep people addicted to the texture of butter, cream and mayonnaise, a new study suggests.

Just as people on a salt-restricted diet gradually come to prefer less salty foods after a while, people who refrain from using any extra fat – no dabs of mayonnaise, no dollops of whipped cream, not even a tiny pat of margarine – gradually tend to prefer less fatty foods, the study found. People who eat a diet just as low in total fat but who add a spread here, a sauce there, continue to prefer high-fat foods when given a choice.

The solution is to go cold turkey – and hold even the non-fat mayo, according to study author Richard D. Mattes, a researcher at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia.

"The fat-substitute products are defying an innate characteristic of people designed to help them acclimate to a low-fat diet," he said.

But Adam Drewnowski, director of the human nutrition program at the University

of Michigan in Ann Arbor, says that while it might be true that going cold turkey is the only way to break the fat habit, it might also be too difficult a transition for most people to make.

"The question is whether this is a reasonable diet strategy for the general public," says Drewnowski, who has been a leader in studying why people find fatty foods so irresistible. "Going cold turkey may be the most important thing to do, but it's also the most difficult thing to do."

The new study, which Drewnowski says is the first of its kind, followed 27 people for 24 weeks.

They were divided into three groups of nine people each. One group was told to continue following their normal diet. Members of the second group were advised to reduce their total fat intake so that no more than 20 per cent of their calories were derived from fat. The third group was advised to reduce its fat intake to no more than 20 per cent of total calories, but in addition was told not to use any extra fat such as butter pats or dabs of mayo.

Every two weeks, all three groups were brought into the offices of the Monell Che-

mical Center, a non-profit centre that sponsors research in tastes and smells, and asked to judge how much they liked the tastes of foods with varying degrees of fat.

Given milk, chocolate milk, tomato soup, vanilla pudding, mashed potatoes and bread, the study participants in the unrestricted diet group expressed no change in their preferences for fat in these foods. The restricted-fat group that had been permitted to continue using extra fat also showed no changes in preferences over the course of the study.

But members of the restricted-fat group that was not allowed to consume extra fat found they liked their foods with a little less fat in them by the time the study was over.

The difference between the fat preferences in the groups was very small, Drewnowski notes.

Even so, he says the study is the first to attempt to settle objectively a debate that has raged among dietitians: whether depriving people of fat would make them crave it all the more, or would slowly get them to want it less.

"This study suggests that depriving people of fat does reduce their fat preference," he said.

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REFERENCE: Mattes, R.D.: Fat preference and adherence to a fat-reduced diet. *Amer. J. Clinical Nutrition* **57**(#3): 373-381 (1993). [DC Library call number: PER RC583.A5]

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