FDA to trim trans fats

By The Associated Press and Leader-Telegram staff

A UW-Stout dietetics professor is praising a decision announced Thursday by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that it plans to phase out what has become public enemy No. 1 in the food industry — trans fat.

Kerry Peterson, an associate professor in the food and nutrition department, agrees with the FDA that eliminating the artery-clogging substance could help prevent thousands of heart attacks and deaths each year.

“Health-wise, I believe this is a really good thing. Consuming trans fat is so detrimental to our heart health, and there is no value to keeping it in our diet,” said Peterson, a registered dietitian.

Heart-clogging trans fats were once a staple of the American diet, plentiful in baked goods, microwave popcorn and fried foods.

Manufacturers already have eliminated many trans fats, responding to criticism from the medical community and to local laws. Even so, the FDA said getting rid of the rest — the average American still eats around a gram of trans fat a day — could prevent 20,000 heart attacks and 7,000 deaths each year.

It won't happen right away. The agency will collect comments for two months before determining a phase-out timetable. Different foods may have different schedules, depending how easy it is to find substitutes.

'We want to do it in a way that doesn't unduly disrupt markets,' said Michael Taylor, FDA’s deputy commissioner for foods. Still, he says, the food 'industry has demonstrated that it is, by and large, feasible to do.'

Indeed, so much already has changed that most people won't notice much difference, if any, in food they get at groceries or restaurants.
Scientists say there are no health benefits to trans fats. And they can raise levels of 'bad' cholesterol, increasing the risk of heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States. Trans fats are widely considered the worst kind for your heart, even worse than saturated fats, which also can contribute to heart disease.

While UW-Stout's Peterson applauds the FDA's decision, she sees at least a couple of issues related to removing trans fat: What will it be replaced with, and will it help people eat healthier?

'When we take things out of food, we often add something back. What will food companies add to the food so that it tastes good and people will buy it?' she asked. 'Will that change be a benefit or detriment to health?'

For example, if food companies remove trans fat but replace it with solid animal fat, or saturated fat, little progress will have been made, she said.

'Food companies and restaurants can use healthier plant oils as an alternative, and some are already doing so, but these oils are not as shelf-stable. So there are issues of food packaging that will need to be discussed, increased cost to consumers, increased waste because frying oil needs to be changed more frequently,' she said.

Trans fats are used both in processed food and in restaurants, often to improve the texture, shelf life or flavor of foods. Though they have been removed from many items, the fats are still found in some baked goods such as pie crusts and biscuits and in ready-to-eat frostings that use the more-solid fats to keep consistency.

They also are sometimes used by restaurants for frying. Many larger chains have phased them out, but smaller restaurants may still get food containing trans fats from suppliers.

How can the government get rid of them? The FDA said it has made a preliminary determination that trans fats no longer fall in the agency's 'generally recognized as safe' category, which covers thousands of additives that manufacturers can add to foods without FDA review. Once trans fats are off the list, anyone who wants to use them would have to petition the agency for a regulation allowing it, and that would likely not be approved.

The fats are created when hydrogen is added to vegetable oil to make it more solid, which is why they are often called partially hydrogenated oils.

Many companies have already phased out trans fats. In 2011, Wal-Mart pledged to remove all artificial trans fats from the foods the company sells by 2016. Recent school lunch guidelines prevent them from being served in cafeterias.