

April 2004

# The Experts' Forum

Feature Article:

## Cheese...The Original Convenience Food

by Helen Bishop-MacDonald

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Of all of the great nutritional qualities that cheese has going for it (protein, calcium, minerals, vitamins), it's amazing to me that a couple of its strongest assets these days are qualities that it **doesn't** have, namely carbohydrates and trans fatty acids. A few years ago these were almost non-issues, but my-oh-my how times have changed. Products are tripping over themselves to proclaim their lowness of carbs or their non-content of trans fatty acids—sometimes both—and food manufacturers are busy changing formulas and recipes to deliver what the customer has come to demand. And here's little ol' cheese that's **naturally** devoid of both these properties.

Let's look first at the carbohydrate situation. No matter what side of the low-carb argument one might be on, the science so far supports the fact that for many people a carbohydrate-restricted diet helps some people lose weight more quickly than the standard low-fat or low-calorie diet **and** their lipid profiles, especially HDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels, are improved on the diet. That's almost blasphemous to the anti-animal fat crowd, but them's the facts ma'am. For those who've come out the other side of dairy-fat phobia and concluded sensibly that cheese won't kill you, this is welcome news indeed. And it's certainly welcome news for those food manufacturers who use cheese as an ingredient in their products. Most cheeses,

particularly the harder ones, contain next to no carbohydrate. This is also a boon for those who are, or think they are, lactose intolerant. They can eat cheese with gay abandon!

Cheese has gone through a bit of a hard time. People loved it, but they were afraid of it...now, in part thanks to the low-carb craze, it's back big time. Fast-food operations are taking away the bun, but not the cheese. Wraps have been developed with low "net carbs", but they still add cheese—mostly for the flavour. The manufacturers of pasta products are making a point of explaining that their product can actually fit in a low-carb diet because pasta has what is called a relatively low glycemic index (an indicator of how much a particular food makes your blood sugar levels rise). Of course, where there's pasta there's cheese! Cheese as an ingredient actually lowers the overall glycemic index of a meal, because cheese's glycemic index is basically zero! Add to that the fact that research has shown that dieters with a high calcium intake (take a bow, cheese!) are more successful at achieving their desired weight than low-calcium dieters, and you can see why cheese deserves a place of honour for those waging the battle of the bulge.

Ah yes, the skeptic agrees, but there's still the problem of animal fats and heart disease. Well, while

it's true that all saturated fats are considered villainous in affairs of the heart, the fact is that many of the saturated fatty acids in dairy fat are either neutral or lower serum cholesterol, while others raise the **good** cholesterol (HDL). Certainly, there are some that elevate the LDL (bad cholesterol) but on the whole, many scientists now agree that dairy fat is most likely neutral in the heart-health arena. More pertinent, however, is the definitive scientific evidence showing that the trans fatty acids found in margarine, shortenings and hydrogenated vegetable oils are much worse for the ticker than is dairy fat...the fat found in cheese.

I'm tempted to say here that cheese contains no trans fatty acids, but that's not entirely accurate. There are naturally occurring trans fats in dairy fat, the result of bacterial-initiated bio-hydrogenation, that are actually good for us. I'm talking about conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) that is produced when bacteria in the cow's gut have their way with linoleic acid and convert it to a form of trans fat. CLA has been shown in animal and epidemiological studies to have potent anti-cancer properties...folks should be having more of it, not less!

What cheese doesn't have, and what the human body never was subjected to until the 1930's, are the artificially produced trans fats that Canadians are currently wallowing in. It's hard to find a packaged baked good, including crackers, that doesn't contain trans fatty acids. Consumers have become very aware of the health risk posed by

trans fats, and the processor who know what's good for a healthy bottom line is converting to ingredients without the artificially produced trans fats. That includes butter...and cheese.

So there you have it. As a food or as an ingredient cheese is almost perfect...it's certainly convenient. A world without cheese is hard to imagine; now, thank goodness, we don't have to.