The road to a healthy heart begins at the grocery store aisles.

But now thanks to a new rule by the Food and Drug Administration, making healthy food choices just got a little bit easier.

The FDA will now require food companies to list the amount of trans fats their products contain. Trans fatty acids, also known as trans fat, are artery-clogging fats that form when vegetable oils are hardened into margarine or shortening. Fried foods such as French fries, fried chicken, doughnuts, and other sweets all include high amounts of trans fat.

Until now, food companies were not required to list the amount of trans fat on nutrition labels. Consumers had no idea how much trans fat was in the food they were eating.

Trans fat is responsible for increasing the amount of “bad” cholesterol and also lowering the levels of “good” cholesterol. Trans fat can also lead to other health risks like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

In many low-cost snack foods, the amount of trans fat is excessively high. Many of the companies that make cheap snack foods use trans fat instead of oil. Cost reduction, extended shelf life of the product, and flavor enhancement are some of the reasons why many food companies choose to include trans fat in their foods.
Already, a few companies like Nestle, Frito Lay and Lipton, are trying to reduce the amount of trans fat in their products.

So why is the FDA finally cracking down? It could be that recent lawsuits against food companies like Nabisco and Kraft Foods, have raised awareness of the silent killer—trans fat.

But, the FDA’s new regulation won’t come into effect until 2006. Until then, consumers need to educate themselves as to what kinds of foods contain trans fat. A way to find out how much trans fat a product might contain is to inspect the ingredient list.

According to Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, you can look at the ingredient list of a product to see if it contains hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, shortening or margarine. You can also tell what types of “good” fats are included in a product by looking at the ingredients. According to the FDA, polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats (such as olive oil, canola oil and corn oil) aren’t so bad for your health.

Here’s some useful information from the FDA: Smaller amounts of hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oil are present if the ingredient is close to the end of the list.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson says the FDA’s decision to require trans fat labeling is just another way to help consumers make healthier food choices.