

Food information to consumers

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In accordance with Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the provision of food information to consumers, Commission presents a report on the presence of trans fats in foods and in the overall diet of the Union population.

This report builds upon data gathered by the Joint Research Centre and:

- reports on the presence of trans fatty acids (TFA) in foods and in the overall diet of the Union population;
- presents the current approaches to limiting TFA consumption worldwide and their effectiveness; and
- outlines some of the possible consequences of introducing such approaches in the European Union.

Societal implications of TFA consumption: heart disease is the leading cause of death in the Union and a high intake of TFA - a particular type of unsaturated fatty acids - seriously increases the risk for heart disease - more than any other nutrient on a per calorie basis. The risk of dying from heart disease is higher when 2% of the daily energy intake is consumed as TFA.

There is evidence that Denmark's introduction of legal limits for industrial TFA, which nearly eliminated those TFA from the Danish food supply, reduced deaths caused by cardiovascular disease.

TFA intake in the EU: the European Food Safety Authority concluded that TFA intakes should be as low as is possible within the context of a nutritionally adequate diet, while the World Health Organization recommends not consuming more than 1% (other organisations say not more than 2%) of daily energy as TFA.

Despite limited availability of EU-wide data, a recent study compiled data from only 9 EU countries and reports that population average daily TFA intakes are below 1% of daily energy but higher intakes exist for specific sub-populations of some of those Member States (citizens from lower income groups or students aged between 18 and 30).

TFA content of foods in Europe: food products with high industrial TFA content (e.g. biscuits or popcorn with values in the order of 40-50 g TFA/100 g fat), including non-pre-packed foods such as bakery products that contain TFA (> 2 g of TFA per 100 g fat). There are public health gains to be reaped by reducing intake.

Four Member States Austria, Denmark, Latvia and Hungary - have already introduced national legal limits and several others have signalled their preference for a EU level decision, while highlighting their readiness to go ahead with national TFA-related measures to reduce population exposure in the absence of a decision at EU level. Further fragmentation in the market may result from this. Should no action be taken at EU level, difficulties might also arise for EU producers who are interested in access to the US market.

Possible means to address TFA consumption in the EU: in the context of this report, a preliminary analysis of the potential effectiveness of the measures that could be adopted at EU level was carried out, each resulting in different potential health benefits but also different potential burden on producers.

The key means to reduce TFA consumption in the EU could be:

1) the introduction of a EU mandatory TFA content declaration: mandatory TFA labelling would serve two purposes: provide incentives to the industry towards reducing TFA from food products and enable consumers to make informed food choices.

However, the effectiveness of this option would seem to depend on three key factors: (i) the contribution to the average TFA intake from the products for which a label would be required, (ii) consumers capacity to appropriately use the information provided by a label, and (iii) their readiness to pay more for healthier food. Low-income populations would be more likely to consume the cheaper products (with high TFA contents); this could widen health inequalities;

2) a EU legal limit on the TFA content of food: the assessment suggests that a legal limit for industrial TFA content would be the most effective measure in terms of public health, consumer protection and compatibility with the internal market. Introducing a legal limit would be expected to achieve the biggest reductions in industrial TFA intake as the phasing out of products containing high levels of industrial TFA- from the market would be potentially complete, applying to all products, pre-packaged and non-packaged. Consumers would be systematically provided with healthier food options without needing to distinguish products with lower TFA levels.

The Commission considers that the way in which this option could be technically put into practice would require further investigation. Any such limit would also most likely need to be designed so as to minimise the risks of unintended consequences and impacts on specific producers and products. Also needing consideration are the possible costs that such a measure could imply for consumers, the producers and suppliers of different type of foods;

3) voluntary agreements towards reducing TFA in foods and diets at EU level: the case of the Netherlands is often cited as a success in voluntary and self-regulated TFA reduction by food business operators. The success of this approach appears to depend on the country and the degree of public engagement and corporate social responsibility of food business operators.

4) EU guidance for national legal limits on the TFA content of food: consequences can be expected to be similar as in the case of no further action at EU level, with the exception that the risk of an increasingly fragmented internal market would be possibly mitigated.

Conclusion: in the light of these points, the report notes the clear need to continue and expedite work in this area by collecting more information and by developing a fuller analysis of the magnitude of the problem to be addressed and the different possible solutions, in particular the option of legal limits for industrial TFA. Accordingly, in accordance with its Better Regulation principles, the Commission intends to rapidly launch a public consultation and carry out a fully-fledged impact assessment. This will allow it to take an informed policy decision in the near future.

