



# FACTSHEET Trans Fatty Acid

## What are trans fat?

Industrially produced trans-fatty acids, also called IP-TFAs or trans fats (TFAs<sup>1</sup>), are artificially hydrogenated fats.

As well as being cheap, such processes help the fat become solid, withstand repeated heating and extend the food product's shelf life. All benefits suit food manufacturers, who have been using trans fats since the 1970s-80s.

## Which foods use them most?

Trans fats are used in many pre-packed and take-away products. Common examples include margarine, biscuits, cakes, sweets, waffles, pizzas and chips. Trans fats do not have to be labelled on food packaging. If ever, they are euphemised as "partially hydrogenated oils".

Despite the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s call to remove industrially produced trans fats from the food supply, they still lurk in many foodstuffs in the [EU](#), sometimes at very high levels:

- In the Czech Republic, half of the **margarines** tested in 2013 by our Czech member dTest contained more than 2 grams of TFAs per 100g of fat. Two contained the alarming amount of 20g/100g, while wafers also contained TFAs;
- In the UK, consumer organisation Which? found in 2012 that the two **take-away fish and chips items** they tested contained more than 2% of TFAs;
- In Latvia in 2012, 2 out of 10 **biscuits** were found to contain more than 5g/100g, with one skyrocketing to 17g.

## Is it safe to eat them?



Although TFAs help the food industry generate profit, they provide no nutritional benefit at all to consumers. On the contrary, they are detrimental to cardiovascular health by increasing the 'bad' cholesterol (LDL) and decreasing the 'good' one (HDL).

Even very low amounts of trans fatty acids can be harmful. As international scientific bodies such as the [WHO](#) and the European Food Safety Authority ([EFSA](#)) were unable to determine a safe intake level for TFAs, they called for intake to be as low as possible.

Some **vulnerable groups** – namely young people and low-income families – are more prone to consuming menus high in trans fats and therefore run more risk of developing diet-related chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease.

## What is the situation in the EU?

**No limit:** Today, there is no mandatory limit on trans fats in food consumed in the EU. Though some food manufacturers' recipes have been reformulated with less trans fats in various countries and average intake has plunged, several products are still loaded with these fats.

<sup>1</sup> In this document, "TFAs" refer to industrially produced trans-fatty acids.



In light of the health risks mentioned in section 3, European and international bodies including the WHO and EFSA have called on governments to take steps to replace TFAs with healthier fats or oils. In the meantime, the WHO suggested a transitional limit of 1% of the total energy intake. Such rate has been interpreted by several EU countries including Denmark and Austria as a **limit of 2g/100g TFAs/fat**.

**East-West divide:** Depending on where you live in the EU, your exposure to TFAs can vary greatly. Eastern populations are more exposed to TFA-loaded foods than their western neighbours. Such inequalities justify coordinated European measures.

However, exposure to TFAs is not defined by geography exclusively. A Londoner shopping mostly in ‘ethnic food stores’ – i.e. those selling eastern food – would be exposed to the same trans fat amounts as a local of Bucharest for instance.

A recent [study](#) found that some products bought in ethnic shops located in eastern Europe could contain exorbitant amounts of 20-30% of TFA per 100g of fat. The same study highlighted that such products sometimes end up on major supermarket shelves in both eastern and western countries.



Some take-away fries were found to contain 8% of TFAs in Belgium, high above the 1% WHO limit.

**The Danish example:** In 2004, Denmark pioneered a maximum limit for TFAs of 2g of fat per 100g of foodstuff. The restriction excluded dairy and meat as they contain natural TFAs in very small quantities and their health effects are still being debated.

Within a year, the initiative proved to be a success on all aspects, including price, texture and quality. TFAs almost completely disappeared from the food supply chain, without creating any burden for the industry who even endorsed the move.

## 🗨️ What does BEUC recommend?

TAs TFAs can harm even in very low amounts, **BEUC believes consumers should not even be given the choice of consuming TFAs**. Consequently, trans fats should disappear from our food altogether.

Because those who eat TFA-loaded foods more frequently are less aware of the problem, relying on consumers’ ability to pay attention to labels does not pay off.

Similarly, counting on the food industry’s willingness to reformulate their products with less trans fat is not restrictive enough.

**Only mandatory restrictions set by the European Commission would help reduce TFAs in our processed foods.** The EU legislation should inspire from the positive experience of those countries who banned TFAs. It would ensure all consumers, including vulnerable ones, are protected from trans fats’ unnecessary and harmful effects wherever they live and whatever they shop for.

For further information see our [position paper](#)