



## The European Commission's initiative to limit industrial TFAs, an opportunity to improve the health of Europeans

AIM recommends the European Commission to:

Set limits to the presence of industrial trans fats in **both pre-packed and non-pre-packed food** by means of **legally-binding measures**.

Introduce the obligation to **indicate trans fats contents** in foods on labels in a **clear and understandable way**.

Increase **nutritional literacy** and populations' awareness on the health effects of TFAs.

Make healthier choices **more available and affordable**.

**Improve food products** across the European Union.

*Trans fatty acids (TFAs) are a type of unsaturated fatty acids present in food. They can be of two different types: ruminant trans fats in food products derived from ruminant animals like cow milk or meat. This type of TFAs usually represents around 3% of the total fat content of a product and never exceeds 9%. "Industrial trans fats" are on the contrary a consequence of the food manufacturing process and can be present in food up to more than 50% of the total fat content. They are due to the use of specific oils for cost saving or technological reasons.*

TFAs are not required in the diet. Moreover, they are not synthesized by the body. Scientific evidence shows that their uptake is harmful to health as it increases "bad cholesterol" and, consequently, the risk of coronary heart disease. As the European Commission quotes in its Impact Assessment: "the risk of dying from heart disease is 20-32% higher when consuming 2% of the daily energy intake from trans fats instead of consum-

ing the same energy amount from carbohydrates, saturated fatty acids, cis monounsaturated fatty acids and cis polyunsaturated fatty acids"<sup>1</sup>. The WHO recommends a daily consumption of TFAs of less than 1% of the total energy intake; while the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) recommends it to be as low as possible. Yet, average intakes show that Europeans tend to exceed those recommendations, especially among some

1. Mozaffarian, S5-S21

2. Report, 8.

population sub-groups such as youth or low-income citizens.

As far as the food products themselves are concerned, levels of industrial TFAs are usually limited to less than 2%. However, there is a lack of homogeneity across the EU, with some product in

Eastern or Southern Eastern Member States containing very high levels (up to 40-50% of the total fat content).<sup>2</sup> Such disparities in both the quality of food and the intake levels exacerbates health inequalities and negatively impacts public health.

As healthcare mutuals and health insurance funds, AIM members have a mission of general interest. They are to protect the health of European citizens while at the same time ensuring the economic sustainability of healthcare systems. In view of these objectives, we recommend the European Commission to:

**Set limits to the presence of industrial trans fats in both pre-packed and non-pre-packed food by means of legally-binding measures.**

Current EU legislation only sets limits for trans fats in infant formula and follow-on formula. Yet, a EU level of legal limits to industrial TFAs presence in foods is highlighted by the European Commission's report<sup>3</sup> itself as the most effective measure in terms of public health and consumer protection. The divergence in levels of TFAs intakes across the EU and across population sub-groups speaks for the added value of an EU-wide action.

As highlighted in the European Commission's Inception Impact Assessment, Article 8 of Regulation 1925/2006 of the European Parliament and the Council on the addition of vitamins and minerals and of certain other substances to food could serve as legal basis. Industrial TFAs or partly hydrogenated oils (PHOs) could then be added to the list in Annex III of the regulation so as to lay down the conditions of their use and, in the future and by a defined date, prohibit PHOs.

**Introduce the obligation to indicate trans fats contents in foods on labels in a clear and understandable way.**

Consumers have the right to be informed on the ingredients of the product they are consuming in a clear, transparent and fully understandable way. Currently, Regulation 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers requires to specify in the ingredients list of all pre-packed food whether refined fats/oils are partly hydrogenated. Moreover, the regulation does not require the indication of the exact trans fat content and prohibits the voluntary declaration of that content by operators. AIM calls for a modification of Article 30(1) of the above-mentioned regulation in order to include trans fats to the list of nutrients which have to be included in the mandatory nutrition declaration of pre-packed food. AIM believes this requirement should be extended to non-prepacked food too. Of course, in the case of non-prepacked products, an alternative to labels should be found. However, the information should still be made available to consumers at the point of sale.

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3. Report, 14.

4. Inception Impact Assessment, 8.

A complete and transparent list of ingredients will definitely be a step in the right direction. However, complete does not mean understandable. AIM would encourage the European Commission to establish a consumer-friendly scheme (such as the so-called “traffic light” system), which would help consumers easily understand when levels of TFAs are unhealthy in a certain product and to which extent. Of course, such a scheme should be comprehensive and take other aspects into account (such as salt, sugar or saturated fatty acids content).

### Increase **nutritional literacy** and populations’ awareness on the health effects of TFAs.

Given that the current legislation does not allow to declare TFA content on labels, not all consumers are able to imply the presence of industrial TFAs from the presence of partly hydrogenated oils on the list of ingredients. For non-prepacked food, the list is not even made available. On the one hand, as stated in our previous recommendation, it is vital to ensure that consumers have access to that information in order to properly monitor their diet and be able to make healthier choices.

On the other hand, the mere availability of that information will not ensure that consumers are able to understand it. The European Commission and Member States should multiply their efforts to increase health literacy amongst their populations, by targeting key sub-groups and by involving as wide a variety of stakeholders as possible (schools, universities, doctors, healthcare payers, governments, audiovisual media, etc.).

### Make healthier choices **more available and affordable**.

Socio-economic factors are a key determinant in consumer behaviours. Consumers with lower income tend to consume products with high industrial trans fats content, often sold at a lower price than their healthier alternatives. Increasing the price of foods containing high levels of TFAs through taxation would definitely encourage populations to go for the healthier option. AIM would welcome an initiative to introduce higher taxation rates for products with high TFA levels.

### Improve food products across the European Union.

The fundamental problem behind the issue of TFAs is the poor quality of some food products sold in the European Union. It is a responsibility of the European Union to ensure that the quality of the products which are traded in its market meet a certain standard. It is unacceptable that some citizens (Eastern or South Eastern for example) are sold lower quality or “second-class” products.

The European Commission and Member States should create incentives which would lead food business operators to engage into reformulation and to look for environmental-friendly and healthy alternatives to partly hydrogenated oils (that is, other than palm oil or saturated fatty acids).

## Sources

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AIM is the umbrella organisation of health mutuels and health insurance funds in Europe and in the world. Through its 58 members from 30 countries, AIM provides health coverage to 240 million people in the world and 209 million in Europe through compulsory and/or complementary health insurance and managing health and social facilities. AIM strives to defend the access to healthcare for all through solidarity-based and non-for profit health insurance. Its mission is to provide a platform for members to exchange on common issues and to represent their interests and values in the European and international Institutions.



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