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Trans fats

European Parliament resolution of 26 October 2016 on trans fats (TFAs) (2016/2637(RSP))

The European Parliament,

– having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the provision of food information to consumers[1] and, in particular, Article 30(7) thereof,

– having regard to the report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 3 December 2015 regarding trans fats in foods and in the overall diet of the Union population (COM(2015)0619),

– having regard to the Joint Research Centre's report entitled 'Trans fatty acids in Europe: where do we stand? A synthesis of the evidence: 2003-2013',

– having regard to the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) scientific opinion of 2009 providing dietary intake recommendations for TFAs,

– having regard to the WHO publications 'The effectiveness of policies for reducing dietary trans fat: a systematic review of the evidence'[2], 'Eliminating trans fats in Europe – A policy brief'[3] and 'Effects of trans-fatty acid intake on blood lipids and lipoproteins: a systematic review and meta-regression analysis'[4],

– having regard to the questions to the Council and to the Commission on trans fats (TFAs) (O-000105/2016 – B8-1801/2016 and O-000106/2016 – B8-1802/2016),

– having regard to the motion for a resolution of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety,

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1 OJ L 304, 22.11.2011, p. 18.
2 Bulletin of the World Health Organization 2013; 91:262–269H.
3 http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/288442/Eliminating-trans-fats-in-Europe-A-policy-brief.pdf?ua=1
4 http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/246109/1/9789241510608-eng.pdf

– having regard to Rules 128(5) and 123(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas trans fatty acids (TFAs) are a particular type of unsaturated fat;

B. whereas, while TFAs are naturally found in foods obtained from ruminants, such as dairy products and meat, and in some plants and products of vegetable origin (leeks, peas, lettuces and rapeseed oil), they are mainly found in industrially produced partially hydrogenated vegetable oils (plant oils that are altered with added hydrogen atoms and used in frying and baking, and in manufactured foods to extend shelf life);

C. whereas, as a result, TFA intake is mostly linked to consumption of industrially produced partially hydrogenated oils used by the industry in a wide range of drink and food products (both pre-packed foods and non-pre-packed foods, such as food sold loose and food served at catering and food services);

D. whereas EFSA concluded in 2010 that TFAs from ruminant sources have similar effects to those from industrial products;

E. whereas ruminant fat contains 3-6 % TFAs;

F. whereas human consumption of naturally occurring TFAs from ruminants is generally low, and whereas the WHO indicates that these naturally occurring TFAs are unlikely to pose a risk to health in current real-world diets owing to the comparatively low intake;

G. whereas this resolution concerns only industrially produced fatty acids;

H. whereas many restaurants and fast-food outlets use TFAs to deep-fry foods because they are inexpensive and can be reused many times in commercial fryers;

I. whereas additional TFAs are added or formed during the preparation of some foods (such as biscuits, cakes, salty snacks and deep-fried foods);

J. whereas frequent consumption of industrially produced partially hydrogenated vegetable oils has been associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (more than any other long-term factor), infertility, endometriosis, gallstones, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, obesity and some cancers;

K. whereas the European authorities should take all necessary measures to combat the causes of obesity;

L. whereas high TFA intake increases the risk of developing coronary heart disease (more than any other nutrient on a per-calorie basis) – a disease that is conservatively estimated to account for some 660 000 deaths annually in the EU, or some 14 % of overall mortality;

M. whereas EFSA recommends that 'TFA intake should be as low as is possible within the context of a nutritionally adequate diet'[1];

N. whereas the WHO recommends more specifically that consumption of TFAs should be less than 1 % of daily energy intake[1];

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1 EFSA Journal 2010; 8(3):1461.

O. whereas the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) concluded in June 2015 that partially hydrogenated oils are not 'generally recognised as safe' for use in human food;

P. whereas, despite limited availability of EU-wide data, a recent study compiling data from nine EU countries reports that the average daily intake of TFAs is below 1 % of daily energy intake, but higher intakes exist within specific sub-populations in some of those Member States[2];

Q. whereas analysis of the most recent publicly available data confirms that, despite a reported reduction of TFAs in certain foods, there are still a number of foods with high levels of TFAs, i.e. above 2 g of TFAs per 100 g of fat (such as biscuits or popcorn with some 40-50 g of TFAs per 100 g of fat, and non-pre-packed foods such as bakery products) in some EU food markets;

R. whereas international studies show that policies aimed at restricting the TFA content of food entail reducing TFA levels without increasing total fat content; whereas such policies are feasible, achievable and likely to have a positive effect on public health;

S. whereas the fact that unfortunately only one in three consumers in the EU has knowledge about TFAs shows that labelling measures have failed to be effective and that action needs to be taken to raise awareness through the education system and media campaigns;

T. whereas EU legislation does not regulate the content of TFAs in foodstuffs, nor does it require its labelling;

U. whereas Austria, Denmark, Latvia and Hungary have legislation in place which limits the content of TFAs in foodstuffs, while most of the other Member States have chosen voluntary measures, such as self-regulation, dietary recommendations or composition criteria for specific traditional products;

V. whereas there is evidence that Denmark's introduction of legal limits for industrial TFAs, which brought in a national limit of 2 % of trans fat in oils and fats in 2003, was successful, significantly reducing deaths caused by cardiovascular disease[3];

W. whereas checking the ingredient list of pre-packed foods for partially hydrogenated oils is the only way in which consumers can identify products that may contain TFAs; whereas under current EU rules consumers may be confused about the difference between partially hydrogenated oils (containing TFAs, among other fatty acids) and fully hydrogenated oils (containing only saturated fatty acids and no TFAs), as Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 requires this information to be given in the ingredients list of pre-packed foods;

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1 http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/42665/1/WHO_TRS_916.pdf?ua=1 pg89, WHO/FAO technical report series 916

2 Mouratidou *et al.* 'Trans Fatty acids in Europe: where do we stand?', JRC Science and Policy Reports 2014; doi:10.2788/1070.

3 Brandon J. *et al.* 'Denmark's policy on artificial trans fat and cardiovascular disease', Am J Prev Med 2015.

X. whereas recent studies have shown that people with higher socioeconomic status have healthier diets than people with lower socioeconomic status and that this gap has been increasing in line with the increase in social inequalities;

Y. whereas, in particular, TFAs tend to be used in cheaper foods and, given that people with lower incomes are more exposed to cheaper foodstuffs with higher TFA content, the potential for widening health inequalities is increased;

Z. whereas appropriate decisions should be taken at EU level in order to reduce intake of industrial TFAs;

AA. whereas health organisations, consumer groups, healthcare professionals' associations and food companies have urged[1] the Commission to come up with a legislative proposal that restricts the amount of industrial TFAs in food to a level similar to that set by the Danish authorities (i.e. 2 g of TFAs per 100 g of fat);

1. Recalls that the issue of TFAs is a priority for Parliament, and reiterates its concern regarding the risks that TFAs pose to human health;

2. Highlights the fact that the US has already announced that food manufacturers will have to remove partially hydrogenated oils from products sold on its domestic market from mid-2018, in the light of the conclusion from 2015 that trans fats are not generally recognised as safe;

3. Recalls evidence that TFA limits can bring rapid and significant health benefits; highlights in this context the success of the experience in Denmark, which brought in a national limit of 2 % of TFAs in oils and fats in 2003;

4. Emphasises that most of the EU population – in particular the most vulnerable people – lack information about TFAs and the health consequences of their consumption, which can preclude consumers from making empowered choices;

5. Is concerned that vulnerable groups, including citizens with lower education and socioeconomic status, and children, are more inclined to eat food with higher TFA content;

6. Acknowledges that all existing TFA reduction strategies appear to be associated with significant reductions in TFA levels in food, and regrets the lack of a harmonised EU approach to TFAs; emphasises that individual actions by Member States will create a patchwork of regulations, possibly resulting in different effects on health from one Member State to another and, moreover, hampering the smooth functioning of the single market and innovation in the food industry;

7. Believes that action should not therefore be taken solely at the national level and that EU measures are necessary if the average intake of TFAs is to be considerably reduced;

8. Points out that, according to the WHO[2], a trans-fat labelling policy is likely to be the most costly measure to implement effectively, while the financial impact of banning

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1 http://www.beuc.eu/publications/open_letter_industrially_produced_tfas_freeeu.pdf

2 Eliminating trans fats in Europe: A policy brief, page 6.

trans fats has been minimal in countries that have implemented such bans, given the low implementation and monitoring costs;

9. Believes that the lack of awareness among consumers regarding the adverse health impact of TFAs renders mandatory TFA labelling an important but insufficient tool compared with mandatory limits in the attempt to reduce TFA intake among EU citizens;

10. Points out further in this respect that a TFA labelling strategy only affects certain foods, leaving unpackaged foods or restaurant food unaffected;

11. Calls on the Commission to establish as soon as possible an EU legal limit on industrial TFAs (as both an ingredient and a final product) in all food in order to reduce their intake among all population groups;

12. Requests that such a proposal be made within two years;

13. Requests that such a proposal be accompanied by an impact assessment evaluating the industrial reformulation costs that would be incurred by a mandatory limit and the potential for these costs to be passed on to consumers;

14. Notes, in this regard, the Commission's announcement that it would conduct a thorough impact assessment in order to evaluate the costs and benefits of different threshold options, and asks the Commission to specifically take into consideration the effect on SMEs;

15. Calls on the food industry to prioritise alternative solutions that comply with health and environmental standards, such as the use of improved oils, new procedures for the modification of fats or combinations of substitutes for TFAs (fibres, cellulose, starches, protein mixtures, etc.);

16. Calls further on the Commission to collaborate with the Member States with a view to increasing nutritional literacy, encouraging and enabling consumers to make healthier food choices and engaging with the industry to encourage the healthy reformulation of their products;

17. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.