

Our position on trans fats

Key message

Trans fatty acids (trans fats) in margarines and fats no longer pose a danger to public health. This is thanks to the food industry's ongoing and self-imposed efforts over recent decades to reformulate food products so that they contain fewer trans fatty acids.

Background

Fats are an essential part of a healthy and well-balanced diet. Together with carbohydrates and proteins, they provide most of the energy in our diet. However, not all fats are healthy for us.

Trans fats – also known as trans fatty acids or (TFAs) – are a case in point. They are a type of unsaturated fat that occurs in both animal and vegetable fats. TFAs in animal fat occur naturally, and are formed by the microbial flora in the stomach of ruminants, such as cows, goats and sheep. These TFAs are present in the milk, butter, cheese and meat products derived from these animals. Most TFAs in vegetable fat are formed when vegetable oils are converted into solid fats in a process called partial hydrogenation.

The TFAs present in both animal and vegetable fats are chemically identical to each other, but differ in the quantities in which they occur. According to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), there is no scientific evidence suggesting that, when consumed in the same amounts, TFAs in animal and vegetable fats differ in how they affect health.¹

However, whether in animal or vegetable fat, TFAs do have a negative impact on health, specifically on cholesterol levels. Consuming TFAs increases not only the total level of cholesterol in the blood but also low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-cholesterol or “bad cholesterol”). At the same time, it decreases high-density lipid protein cholesterol (HDL-cholesterol or “good cholesterol”).

The reduction in HDL-cholesterol specifically caused by TFAs means that, at equal intakes, the ratio of total cholesterol to HDL-cholesterol increases

much more compared to saturated fatty acids (SFAs).^{2,3} Because of this, TFAs are considered a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease compared to SFAs. The World Health Organisation recommends limiting the intake of TFAs to less than 1% of total energy intake.⁴

In light of these concerns, most EU countries have now lowered the intake of non-ruminant TFAs in food so that it is below the level that would create a public health concern.⁵ This successful result was achieved by the voluntary efforts of the food industry to reformulate products.

Our position

Vandemoortele recognises that TFAs, both from animal and vegetable fat, have a negative effect on human health, and that their presence needs to be reduced to below the level that make them a public health concern.

Over the past 20 years, due to extensive innovation and technological efforts, the average the levels of TFAs in our own products has been brought down to below 2% of the total fat content, which is below the level of health concern. At the same time, the total sum of SFAs and TFAs has not increased.

In line with our efforts so far, we will continue to work to further reduce the TFA content of our products. Furthermore, we are encouraging and assisting our customers to use margarine and fat products for their products that have a maximum of 2% TFAs (of total fat basis).

¹ EFSA Panel on Dietetic Products, Nutrition, and Allergies (NDA); Scientific Opinion on Dietary Reference Values for fats, including saturated fatty acids, polyunsaturated fatty acids, monounsaturated fatty acids, trans fatty acids, and cholesterol. EFSA Publication. Parma, Italy: European Food Safety Authority, 2010. 107 p. (The EFSA Journal; No. 1461).

² Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council regarding trans fats in foods and in the overall diet of the Union population, European Commission, 2015.

³ Li Y et al. (2015), Saturated Fats Compared With Unsaturated Fats and Sources of Carbohydrates in Relation to Risk of Coronary Heart Disease. A Prospective Cohort Study. *J Am Coll Cardiol.*; 66(14):1538-1548.

⁴ Fats and Fatty Acids in Human Nutrition, Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation Report, November 2008.

⁵ EFSA opinion of the scientific panel on dietetic products, nutrition and allergies on a request from the Commission related to the presence of trans fatty acids in foods and the effects on human health of the consumption of trans fatty acids (Request EFSA-Q-2003-022), adopted on 8 July 2004.