

# Trade liberalization linked to obesity in Central America

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Since trade liberalization between Central and North America, imports and availability of processed, high-fat and high-sugar foods have increased dramatically. Researchers writing in BioMed Central's open access journal *Globalization and Health* link this influx of American junk food to a 'nutrition transition' in Central American countries, with a growing burden diet-related chronic disease.

Anne Marie Thow, from the University of Sydney, worked with Corinna Hawkes from the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, to compare import, production and availability data for various foodstuffs to changes in tariff and non-tariff barriers for several Central American countries. Thow said, "Central America has undergone extensive trade liberalization over the past two decades, and has recently signed a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. These policies have implications for health in the region. Specifically, they have been a factor in facilitating the 'nutrition transition', which is associated with rising rates of obesity and [chronic diseases](#) such as cardiovascular disease and cancer".

Average tariffs in Central America declined from 45% in 1985 to around 6% in 2000. In line with this, total food imports into the Central American countries more than doubled between 1990/92-2003/05 from 4.5 to 9.6 million tones. During that time period, imports of processed cheese, such as cheese slices, rose 3215% to comprise 37% of all cheese imports from the US, and French fries formed 23% of all imports of fruits and vegetables. According to Thow, "In Central America,

liberalization appears to have directly influenced the availability and price of meat and processed foods, many of which are energy-dense and high in fats, sugars and salt".

The researchers conclude, "While there are arguments for and against trade liberalization, it is essential to consider its effects on the poor. Factors affecting income and distribution are important in determining diet and health, and these factors are likely to be more significant for the poor in the process of uneven dietary development".

More information: The implications of trade liberalization for diet and health: a case study from Central America, Anne Marie Thow and Corinna Hawkes, *Globalization and Health* (in press), [www.globalizationandhealth.com/](http://www.globalizationandhealth.com/)

Source: BioMed Central ([news](#) : [web](#))

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