

Millions of Europeans still at risk from high trans fatty acid content in popular foods

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The heart health of millions of Europeans is still at risk because of the persistently high trans fatty acid content of certain fast and convenience foods, indicates research published in the online journal *BMJ Open*.

While the overall TFA fat content of foods has fallen, few European countries have imposed any legal limits, meaning that it is perfectly possible to buy certain packaged and restaurant foods which still contain very high levels, say the authors.

[Trans fatty acids](#) (TFA) are primarily produced by the industrial [hydrogenation](#) of [vegetable oils](#), a process that solidifies them and helps to prolong the shelf life of the [baked goods](#) in which they are used.

But previous research, which analysed data from four large studies, indicates that a daily intake of TFA of 5 g was associated with a 23% increased risk of [coronary heart disease](#).

The authors analysed the TFA content of popular foods in 16 member countries of the European Union (EU) in 2005 and again in several countries in 2009.

Only those foods which listed "partially hydrogenated vegetable fat" high on the contents list and contained more than 15g of fat per 100g were included.

In all, 70 servings of French fries and chicken nuggets, 90 packs of

microwavable popcorn, and 442 samples of cakes, biscuits, and wafers were included in the analysis.

In 2005, a large serving of French fries and nuggets, 100g of microwavable popcorn, and 100g of cake or biscuits or wafers provided more than 30g/100g of TFA in five [EU countries](#) in Eastern Europe and between 20g and 30g in eight Western European countries.

In 2009 the analysis revealed that the TFA content in [French fries](#) and nuggets had fallen substantially in all the European countries studied. But while the TFA content of popcorn, cakes and biscuits had fallen in Western European countries, this was not the case in Eastern Europe where it remained high.

The same portions still provided high TFA content of between 10g and 20g in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. But the equivalent menu in Germany, France and the UK provided less than 2g.

Clearer food labelling is one way of curbing trans fatty acid intake, but most countries still rely on food manufacturers to voluntarily reduce the TFA content of their products, the authors point out.

Only a few countries—Denmark, Austria, Switzerland and Iceland—have gone down the legislative route and forced industry to limit the amount of TFA used in foods to 2% of the total fat.

But foods containing trans fats, which can comprise up to 60% of the total fat content, can still legally be sold as shop bought packaged goods, or unpackaged in restaurants and fast [food](#) outlets elsewhere in Europe, the authors emphasise.

"It means that in 2012 only a minority—approximately 14 million of the 500 million people in the EU—are protected by legislation against foods

[containing] high amounts of [TFA]," they warn.

More information: A trans European Union difference in the decline in trans fatty acids in popular foods: a market basket investigation [doi 10.1136/bmjopen-2012-000859](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2012-000859)

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