

# Removing this hidden nasty from our food could save thousands of lives

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Banning a harmful ingredient from the Australian food supply could prevent thousands of deaths from heart disease according to new research from The George Institute for Global Health.

Trans fatty acids—made during the [industrial process](#) that converts vegetable oils into a solid form of fat—are a well-known risk factor for [heart disease](#). But it has been argued that eliminating them completely—as required by law in many overseas countries—would be too costly for both government and the [food industry](#).

Dr. Jason Wu, Program Head of Nutrition Science at The George Institute said that while the intake of trans fatty acids in Australia is generally low, levels continue to exceed health guidelines for some people, mostly those with less education and income.

"Despite the known health risks, our previous research shows progress on reducing [trans fats](#) in Australia's packaged food supply has slowed to a halt," he said.

While trans fats occur naturally at low levels in meat and cow's milk, people in most countries can also get them from partially hydrogenated [vegetable oils](#) in processed foods such as pastries. But avoiding them isn't easy because in Australia, it's not compulsory for manufacturers to list the amount of trans fats on the nutrition information panel on packaged foods.

Researchers from The George Institute for Global Health set out to calculate the potential costs and health benefits of a nationwide ban on industrial trans-fatty acids in Australia [food](#) supply.

The modelling study found that such a ban could prevent around 2,000 deaths and 10,000 heart attacks over the first ten years and up to 42,000 deaths from heart disease over the lifetime of the adult population (the time from when the ban starts to when all individuals died or reached 100 years of age).

The cost of implementing this legislative measure was estimated to be

A\$22 million during the first ten years and A\$56 million over the population lifetime, most of which was down to government costs for monitoring implementation of the ban.

However, the estimated heart disease-related healthcare cost savings, compared to no ban, reached A\$80 million over ten years and A\$538 million over a lifetime.

Overall, the elimination of trans fatty acids in Australia was estimated to be cost-saving to highly cost-effective during the first ten years, and highly cost-effective over the population lifetime.

Lead author and Senior Research Fellow at The George Institute Dr. Matti Marklund said the results supported the call by the WHO to eliminate trans fats from the [food supply](#) around the world.

"Our modelling study suggests that even in countries like Australia where intake is low, elimination of industrial trans-fatty acids can improve public health," he said.

"We also found that socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and Australians outside major cities could potentially have the greatest health gains from such legislation."

In the meantime, in order to minimise your intake of trans [fatty acids](#) Dr. Marklund advised checking the labels of the packaged foods before buying.

"Any products that include partially hydrogenated fat or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil on the ingredient list are more likely to contain trans fats," he said.

The study is published in *PLOS Medicine*.

**More information:** *PLOS Medicine*, [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003407](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003407)

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