

UNILEVER'S POSITION ON TRANS FAT

Key messages

- Unilever supports the World Health Organisation (WHO) view that food manufacturers, retailers and others should remove industrially produced trans fat from the food supply.
- As part of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, in 2012, we had removed trans fats from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils across our portfolio to less than 1 g per 100 g of product.
- Fulfilling the global commitment to the WHO, to remove all industrially produced trans fat across our portfolio to less than 2 g per 100 g of total fat by 2023, means we are working closely with our suppliers. Alongside sharpening our specifications for industrially produced trans fat, we've found alternative ingredients that meet the WHO threshold to use in our product reformulations.

Background

Trans fats, also known as 'trans fatty acids' (TFAs), are naturally formed in the digestive system of ruminants and occur in small amounts in butter, cheese and meat. These are called animal derived or 'ruminant' trans fats. Industrial trans fats can be formed in some vegetable oil refinement steps.

Evidence shows that both industrial and animal derived trans fats adversely affect the blood cholesterol profile and can, in turn, increase the risk of coronary heart



disease. Public health authorities recommend consumption of total trans fats to be as low as possible because of their established adverse effects on heart health.

Context

A key source of industrial trans fats is an oil refinement process called 'hydrogenation'. Hydrogenation is used to convert liquid vegetable oils into solid fats for greater functionality, stability and shelf life. Full hydrogenation results in production of saturated fats only and does not result in trans fat production.

However, when partially hydrogenated vegetable oils (PHVO) are created, this hydrogenation process also produces trans fats next to saturated fats.

In the past, PHVOs were applied in food products at large scale, because it was cheaper and had longer shelf life than butter, and because textural, functional and sensory properties of the fats could be customized.

Since the discovery of trans fats adverse effects in the nineties, a considerable decrease in trans fat intake has been made possible through technological developments that have led to the replacement of PHVO. The margarine industry has been at the forefront of this voluntary reformulation.

In many countries in Europe and elsewhere, animal derived trans fats are now the main source of trans fat intake, due to significant voluntary industrial reformulation as well as regulations. However, the WHO reported that many countries still need to take action to reduce industrial trans fat consumption.

Unilever's position

We strongly support the World Health Organisation (WHO) view that food manufacturers, retailers and others should remove industrial trans fat from the food supply and welcome that this has been identified as a "best buy" public health intervention by the WHO and the World Economic Forum.



We have been reducing our use of trans fats from PHVO for more than 20 years. In 2010, as part of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, we committed to remove PHVO from all our products. By 2012, we had removed trans fats from PHVO across our portfolio to less than 1 g per 100 g of product.

In May 2019, we made a global commitment to the World Health Organization that by 2023, all industrially produced trans fat will not exceed 2 g per 100 g of total fat in any of our products. This new commitment is stricter, because it includes other industrial sources of trans fat, next to trans fat from PHVO. In general, other industrial sources contain trans fat in smaller quantities, e.g. some food flavourings contain small amounts. To fulfil this new commitment means working closely with our suppliers. Alongside sharpening our specifications for industrial trans fat, we've found alternative ingredients that meet the WHO threshold to use in our product reformulations.

Further information

- REPLACE Trans Fat-Free by 2023. An action package to eliminate industrially-produced trans fat from the global food supply. World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/teams/nutrition-and-food-safety/replace-trans-fat>
- We have published our definition and approach to removing trans fats from PHVO. See: Melnikov, S., & Zevenbergen, H. "Implementation of removing trans fatty acids originating from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils", *New Food* 2012; 5: 44-46. This approach focuses on main ingredients in our recipes and does not include traces of trans fats from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil that may be found in some flavours or emulsifiers.

December 2021

