

Summary report on the

Elimination of trans fatty acids in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

WHO-EM/NUT/287/E

Cairo, Egypt
10–11 August 2020



REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE

World Health
Organization

Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of mortality globally, responsible for almost 68% of deaths in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, and unhealthy diet is a major contributor to this. Countries are therefore working towards reducing diet-related NCD risk factors, including the consumption of trans-fatty acids (TFA). The Eastern Mediterranean Region has one of the highest levels of TFA in its food supply.

Replacing industrially-produced TFA (iTFA) with healthier fats/oils is feasible and cost-effective, and elimination of iTFA by 2023 is a global and regional priority for WHO. In May 2018, WHO launched the REPLACE action package to eliminate industrially-produced trans fat from the global food supply through strategic action in six areas:

- Review dietary sources of industrially-produced trans fat and the landscape for required policy change.
- Promote the replacement of industrially-produced trans fat with healthier fats and oils.
- Legislate or enact regulatory actions to eliminate industrially-produced trans fat.
- Assess and monitor trans fat content in the food supply and changes in the trans fat consumption of the population.
- Create awareness of the negative health impact of trans fat among policy-makers, producers, suppliers, and the public.
- Enforce compliance with policies and regulations.

Best-practice regulatory measures include setting mandatory limits such as a ban on the production or use of partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs), an iTFA limit of 2% of total fat, or both a PHOs ban and an iTFA limit. PHOs and iTFA should be defined, with no exceptions, and all food product categories and facilities should be included, with no

exceptions or limited exceptions that pose no health risk. Labelling is also a crucial tool and labelling rules on packaged food should require an ingredients list with TFA/PHOs clearly identifiable, a nutrition information table with the TFA levels clearly indicated, and appropriate conditions on TFA-free claims.

As part of providing technical support and regulatory capacity-building to the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, a (second) virtual training workshop was held in August 2020. The workshop aimed to provide countries with technical guidance from WHO and [Resolve to Save Lives](#) (an initiative of the global public health organization [Vital Strategies](#)).

Its specific objectives were to:

- identify progress, enablers and barriers to eliminating TFA in countries;
- build capacity and relationships with partners working on TFA regulations in the Region;
- facilitate cross-regional learning amongst nutrition focal points, experts and stakeholders; and
- identify specific support needs and create follow-up plans to provide technical support.

The meeting was facilitated by Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, Regional Adviser in Nutrition at the WHO Regional Office, the REPLACE Team and WHO headquarters. It was attended by nutrition focal points from countries and representatives from academia and civil society. Fifteen countries shared updates on their progress towards TFA elimination, with several reporting significant progress at all stages of the policy cycle.

2. Summary of discussions

The meeting focused on the recommended best-practices in TFA policies, including:

- mandatory 2% limits – limiting iTFA to 2 g per 100 g of total oils and fats in all foods; and
- a mandatory national ban on the production or use of PHOs as an ingredient in all foods.

The choice of which of these policies is most appropriate depends on the specific context in a country.

Global progress over the past 12 months was outlined, including best-practice TFA policies coming into effect in two countries (Lithuania and Saudi Arabia) and being passed in two other (Brazil and Turkey). In addition, draft policies that meet the best practice criteria have been proposed and notified in India and Nigeria. In total, 14 countries had best practice TFA policies being implemented in 2020, and 40 countries had measures that would come into effect by 2022. Most countries do not, therefore, have policies in place yet and most policy action to date has been in higher-income countries in the WHO Americas and European regions. Consequently, there is still a long way to go to achieve global elimination by 2023.

Countries reported a wide range of barriers that have hindered progress in TFA elimination. The conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in some countries, ongoing political or economic instability have exacerbated these challenges.

Several enablers or solutions for accelerating progress were identified. Policy preparation could be facilitated by compiling evidence, publishing technical reports, mapping existing legislation, building on

existing national nutrition policies/strategies, calculating costs/benefits of alternative policies, and establishing or strengthening multisectoral coordination mechanisms. During the policy development phase, progress can be accelerated by having strong regulatory bodies, writing strong, comprehensive, legally-sound and enforceable rules, and building political support. Policy implementation could be facilitated by educating stakeholders and providing guidance on compliance and enforcement of the rules. Finally, monitoring can be strengthened by including a monitoring and evaluation mechanism within regulatory measures and strengthening laboratory capacities.

Countries requested further technical support and guidance on advocacy, enforcement, laboratory capacity, analytical methodology and communication. Another key issue that was discussed concerned the provision of technical guidance for companies on replacing iTFA with healthy, cost-effective alternatives. It was noted that multisectoral collaboration is critical to being able to implement effective action.

Regional cooperation is also important and a regional action plan for the elimination of iTFA from the food supply in the Eastern Mediterranean Region by 2023 is being developed. The action plan will set out the capacity-building, technical support and other needs, and the ways in which WHO and Resolve to Save Lives can support countries in their efforts.

3. The way forward

Potential enablers and solutions to support countries in the implementation of TFA elimination policies were identified. These can be categorized according to their place in the policy cycle.

1. In the preparation phase, enablers or solutions could include:
 - compiling evidence and publishing technical reports;
 - mapping existing laws/legislation and building on existing national nutrition policies/strategies;
 - calculating costs/benefits of alternative policies; and
 - establishing a multisectoral technical committee and building on existing coordination mechanisms.
2. During the policy development phase, the following measures might be useful to enable progress or provide solutions:
 - having strong regulatory bodies;
 - writing strong, comprehensive, legally-sound and enforceable rules; and
 - building political support (e.g. support of parliamentarians, other ministers beyond health).
3. During the policy implementation phase, the process could be facilitated by educating stakeholders and providing guidance on compliance and enforcement of the rules.
4. Monitoring and evaluation could be supported by:
 - ensuring that a monitoring and evaluation mechanism is included as part of national legislation or regulation; and
 - the strengthening of laboratory capacities.



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