Regulate trans fat—even if the burden is low

Trans fat is a harmful compound—used in many countries as a substitute for butter or lard in fried foods, baked goods, and spreads—that increases the risk of heart attack and death. Globally, artificial trans fat is estimated to cause more than half a million deaths every year. Trans fat can be eliminated and replaced with healthier alternatives, and many governments have policies in place that protect their people. Until recently, trans fat regulations, and their proven benefits, have been largely concentrated in wealthy countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) aims to eliminate artificial trans fat from all countries by 2030 through the REPLACE initiative.

Trans fat elimination can save more than 17 million lives worldwide – but only with effective policies in all countries

Completely eliminating artificial trans fat from the global food supply would save 17.5 million lives over the next 25 years[1], but this requires all countries to take regulatory action to protect their populations. Even in countries where the estimated trans fat burden is low, or where other high-burden health issues present competing demands for resources, there are compelling reasons to act now.

The time to act is now

- **Trans fat burden may increase in countries without regulations.** With a growing number of countries regulating trans fat, manufacturers selling products containing trans fat may shift markets to compensate. When trans fat elimination regulations went into effect in Western Europe, the number of foods high in trans fat increased in Eastern European countries that did not have regulations in place[2]. Implementing regulations before trans fat levels are high saves lives and reduces future enforcement costs.
- **Eliminating trans fat is easier when trans fat burden is small.** In Thailand—whose government received a WHO TFA validation certificate for implementing and enforcing a best practice ban of partially-hydrogenated oils (PHO)—the relatively low trans fat burden resulted in straightforward, low-investment compliance monitoring of just three domestic PHO producers.
- **Action against trans fat reinforces food safety more broadly.** General awareness of the harms of trans fat will rise as momentum for trans fat elimination continues. By regulating trans fat, governments can maintain public confidence in food safety processes and avoid public outcry.
- **Low national intake of trans fat can conceal harm to vulnerable groups.** Even when average population intake estimates are below the WHO recommendation of 1% of total daily energy, there may be subgroups with dangerously high levels of trans fat exposure. National regulations will ensure equitable access to healthy foods and promote equitable health outcomes.
- **Trans fat elimination can strengthen regulatory capacity.** Trans fat elimination is generally acceptable to stakeholders (including industry), and presents an opportunity to build regulatory systems that can be leveraged for other nutrients, such as sodium and sugar.

1 Kontis V, Cobb LK et al. "Three Public Health Interventions Could Save 94 Million Lives in 25 Years Global Impact Assessment Analysis." Circulation, www.ahajournals.org/doi/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.118.038160.

2 Stender S, Astrup A, and Dyerberg J. Tracing artificial trans fat in popular foods in Europe: a market basket investigation. BMJ Open 2014; 4: e005218. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2014-005218.