

World Health Assembly Side Event

Nutrition Policy Action to Save Lives: Trans Fat Free by 2023

22 May 2019, Geneva

The NCD Alliance and its partner Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of Vital Strategies, hosted a side event at the 72nd World Health Assembly on the elimination of industrially-produced trans fatty acids (iTFA) on 22 May 2019.

The goals of the side event were to launch the [REPLACE Progress Report 2019 and new modules supporting the WHO REPLACE package](#) to eliminate iTFAs from the food supply and to present progress to date from the first year of REPLACE, looking ahead to the 2023 target; and to launch the NCD Alliance report “[Trans Fat Free by 2023: Case Studies in Trans Fat Elimination](#)” by considering different policy approaches to iTFA elimination using the examples of Slovenia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Roundtable was moderated by Katie Dain, CEO of the NCD Alliance, and speakers included

- Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General, WHO
- Dr Naoko Yamamoto, Assistant Director-General, Universal Health Coverage / Healthier Populations, WHO
- Dr Tom Frieden, President, Resolve to Save Lives
- Dr Francesco Branca, Director, Department of Nutrition for Health and Development, WHO
- Prof Igor Pravst, Head of Research Group, Nutrition and Public Health, Nutrition Institute, Slovenia
- Faisal Farhad Bin Sunaid, Manager of Healthy Food Program, Saudi Arabia Food & Drug Authority
- Prof Shauna Downs, Assistant Professor, Department of Urban-Global Public Health, Rutgers University



The event was very well attended by around 50 participants comprising representatives of government delegations, civil society organisations, international organisations, and private sector.

Main learnings

- Industrially-produced trans fats (iTfAs)¹ are estimated to contribute to over half a million deaths every year. iTfAs have no known health benefits.
- iTfAs can be replaced in foods without impacting their consistency and taste – feasible political and technological solutions to replace iTfAs with healthier oils and fats exist.
- Over 50 countries worldwide have enacted mandatory policies to eliminate iTfAs, demonstrating that political action is possible.
- Voluntary iTFA targets in food do not work – mandatory limits or bans must be set. That’s why WHO’s REPLACE action package on the elimination of iTfAs focuses strongly on legislative and regulatory measures.
- TFA policies should be combined with strong complementary policies across the food system (e.g. in the areas of agricultural policy, supply chain, tariffs on imports).
- Civil society organisations play an important role in informing the public, providing support for draft legislation/regulation and monitoring implementation. Academics are crucial to provide the necessary evidence for action on iTfAs.
- Academics are instrumental in generating the required evidence to support the development of policies regulating iTFA.
- WHO can provide necessary technical assistance in-country. The WHO’s REPLACE action package and module as well as their technical support in-country should be leveraged by policy-makers intending to regulate iTfAs.

“Nutrition is a fundamental element to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 6 out of 10 top risk factors for mortality are diet related.”

Katie Dain, NCD Alliance



¹ iTfAs are unsaturated fats that are chemically manufactured by hydrogenation to be used as solid fats. Naturally occurring TFAs exist but the vast majority of TFAs are produced industrially. They are common in baked goods, pre-packaged foods and some cooking oils. iTfAs have been a commercially very successful product, becoming very popular in the diet during the 20th century. iTfAs increase overall mortality, particularly cardiovascular mortality. WHO recommends that TFAs, both natural and industrial, do not exceed 1% of energy intake per day. Global consumption of iTfAs ranges from 0.3%-6.3% of energy intake per day, with a global average of 1.3%.

Detailed notes from speakers*

Scene setting remarks: Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO

Dr Tedros pointed out that 40 million people died from NCDs in 2016, in particular from cardiovascular diseases. To change this, iTFAs are rightly given attention. In addition to each country taking ownership in implementing iTFA policies, political will is necessary to move the food industry to change. Only recently, WHO received a commitment from member organisations of the International Food & Beverage Alliance to meet the 2023 goal of iTFA elimination.

“The current level of NCD deaths is unacceptable. Ownership [of iTFA elimination] by each and every country is how we win this fight.”

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO



Introductory remarks: Dr Naoko Yamamoto, Assistant Director-General, Healthier Populations, WHO

Dr Yamamoto explained that WHO's work on iTFA elimination through its REPLACE action package will be henceforth situated within WHO's new Health Populations programme. She stressed the importance to focus on NCD risk factors such as diet, malnutrition in all its forms and health promotion to achieve the WHO target of one billion more people enjoying better health and well-being. She thanked NCD Alliance and Resolve to Save Lives for their work on and support of WHO's REPLACE action package.

Resolve to Save Lives: Dr Tom Frieden, President and CEO, Resolve to Save Lives

Dr Frieden explained that iTFAs are estimated to cause half a million deaths each year and can be replaced with healthier oils without impacting the cost, taste or shelf life of food products – “only our hearts will know the difference”, as Dr Frieden puts it. iTFAs have no redeeming health or nutritional quality, which is why Dr Frieden likens them to tobacco. There is no safe level of iTFAs, and there is no practical way for consumers to avoid iTFAs. Therefore, Resolve to Save Lives and WHO call for mandatory regulations to eliminate iTFAs. Denmark showed the way in 2003, and there has been a lot of

* The views expressed by speakers are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the hosting organisations, NCD Alliance and Resolve to Save Lives.

momentum since the REPLACE action package was published by WHO in 2018 (e.g. Thailand and Slovenia implemented policies, and the EU enacted a regulation).

Resolve to Save Lives identified 93 companies which manufacture oils and fats containing iTFAs and sent a letter to them, asking for a commitment to eliminate iTFAs. Only 10 responded.

“If we eliminate trans fat, over the course of the next 25 years, 17 million individuals will be saved.”

Dr Tom Frieden, Resolve to Save Lives



While serving as Health Commissioner in New York City, Dr Frieden implemented an iTFA ban in restaurants which prompted 50 national food chains to eliminate iTFAs. He needed to prove to the public and decision-makers that more than voluntary measures are needed, which did not work. He also had to counter arguments that it is difficult to reformulate, that there are no alternatives and that it is expensive. Dr Frieden established a helpline for restaurants – but it was never used. Evaluations showed that New York City’s iTFA ban reduced mortality from cardiovascular diseases by 4.5%.

“Governments work more effectively when civil society pushes them.”

Dr Tom Frieden, Resolve to Save Lives

Launch of REPLACE Modules & Annual Report: Dr Francesco Branca, Director, Department of Nutrition, WHO

Dr Branca launched the first REPLACE Progress Report on Global Trans Fat Elimination, released one year after the launch of the REPLACE action package. The Report tracks progress towards the elimination of iTFAs by 2023 and will be released annually, counting down to 2023. The report is accompanied by country scorecards.

The report shows that around 31% of the global population are covered by either a ban on partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs) or a limit on iTFAs. Regional bodies have started to regulate, too, such as the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, many countries do not yet have policies in place, and mostly high-income countries have regulated iTFAs. To increase the number of countries regulating iTFAs, the report recommends strategic priorities for the next 12 months to achieve the 2023 target. Dr Branca explained that WHO will strengthen their support of countries which plan to regulate iTFAs. He pointed out the necessity to share experiences and best practices amongst policy-makers, but also urged industry to firmly commit to eliminate iTFAs.



"I am very optimistic that we can achieve this goal of trans fat elimination by 2023."

Dr Francesco Branca, WHO

Branca also launched six new modules which contain practical, step-by-step implementation information for governments on how to eliminate iTFAs. He pointed out that the goal should be to pass and enforce best practice policies (2% iTFA limit or PHO ban).

REPLACE stands for the six strategic action areas which ensure the prompt, complete, and sustained elimination of industrially-produced trans fats from the food supply:

- 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 trans fat consumption in 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.

A food systems approach to iTFA elimination: Prof Shauna Downs, Assistant Professor, Department of Urban-Global Public Health, Rutgers University, USA

Prof Downs used a food systems approach to situate iTFA policies in the wider food policy space because food systems² are central to a healthy diet and to understand the food environment in which a population lives (the space in which consumers make their food choices). She demonstrated that iTFAs reach beyond SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages), touching all SDGs. When using a food systems approach, it becomes evident that the broader policy context must be taken into account to promote a policy package to eliminate iTFAs: import and export policies are relevant, e.g. tariffs on healthy oils disincentivize the use of them; supply chain

considerations are crucial, e.g. market access and increasing the transparency in distribution channels as edible oils are often mislabelled and the informal food sector not regulated; and appropriate agricultural policies not only increase domestic production of crops used to produce healthier edible oils (thus lowering reliance on imports), but can also decrease production of low-quality seeds, soil degradation and biodiversity loss. In addition, social and cultural norms on oil consumption have to be considered.



² A useful conceptual graphic of what a food system constitutes can be found on page 26 of the report "Food Systems and Nutrition", a 2017 report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, available here: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE_Reports/HLPE-Report-12_EN.pdf.

Complementary policies to enable the achievement of SDGs include investing in research and development to produce healthier replacement oils; incentivise the production of healthier oils; subsidise small industries (e.g. for specific equipment) and increase reformulation capacity; implement mandatory food labelling; increase enforcement capacity; and conduct information campaigns.

“TFA elimination goes beyond SDGs 2 and 3 on hunger and health – it touches all SDGs. (...) Regulating mandatory upper limits should be combined with strong complementary policies across the food system.”

Prof Shauna Downs, Rutgers University

Using the case of India, where Prof Downs has conducted extensive research, she demonstrated the need for the above-mentioned complementary policies in an environment with a reliance on oil imports; a large, informal food sector and re-use of oils by street vendors; limited enforcement capacity; as well as an industry using saturated fats to reformulate.

Slovenia’s iTFA policy: Prof Igor Pravst, Head of Research Group, Nutrition and Public Health, Nutrition Institute, Slovenia

Slovenia enacted an iTFA limit in March 2018, which went into effect in April 2019. The regulation sets an upper limit of 2g iTFAs per 100g fats in all foods, and is applicable to any food, whether it is sold to businesses or consumers. The Slovenian Ministry of Health has developed a plan to monitor and evaluate if the iTFA limit is complied with.

Researchers and advocates were instrumental in pushing for an iTFA limit: research by Prof Steen Stender of the University of Copenhagen showed that cookies, wafers and biscuits in Slovenia contain high levels of iTFAs while similar products sold in western European countries were iTFA-free. Many of the iTFA-laden products in Slovenia were imported from Balkan countries. Prof Pravst and colleagues were shocked and decided to act. The scientific community of Slovenia came together to advocate for an iTFA limit by organising scientific and press conferences and strategically working with the media, including radio, print, internet and TV (e.g. by producing a one-hour TV show on iTFAs). These advocacy



activities led to a voluntary removal of iTFAs of some food companies, but margarines used by food businesses continued to have high iTFA levels. Other advocacy outcomes were the willingness of Slovenian policymakers to act and to fund national research on iTFA sources and levels.

Slovenia, as member state of the EU, is subject to EU law. The European Commission promised action on iTFAs, but the policy process was significantly delayed. Slovenian policymakers had planned to await regional action, but due to the delay decided to move forward with a national policy as it promised to be more effective and quicker to protect Slovenians from iTFAs.

Saudi Arabia’s iTFA policies: Faisal Farhad Bin Sunaid, Manager of Healthy Food Program, Saudi Food & Drug Authority, Saudi Arabia

Mr Bin Sunaid explained that food policy is particularly important in Saudi Arabia where 80% of food is imported, 37% of deaths are caused by cardiovascular disease and hypertension rates (15.2% of the population, with 40.5% at risk) and hypercholesterolaemia rates (8.5% of the population, with 20.4% at risk) are high. The Saudi FDA worked closely with the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office of WHO, receiving technical support. The Saudi FDA chose a step-wise approach to eliminating iTFAs. It

commenced by enacting a mandatory TFA labelling in November 2015, which took effect in September 2016.



The Saudi FDA followed up by enacting a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regulation limiting to 2% of fats and oils and 5% of foods in November 2015 (entering into force in November 2017) – the first GCC country to do so. In December 2018, it enacted a PHO ban, which will enter into force in January 2020. In parallel, a voluntary agreement with the food industry was entered into, in which large multilateral companies committed to limit PHOs to less than 1% of weight in their food products. An inspection campaign conducted in February

2018 found that 94.7% of food products met the 2% and 5% iTFA limits. Awareness campaigns played a major role in overall fat reduction

iTFA elimination was supported by awareness campaigns on fat reduction in food and a Healthy Food Strategy, which the Saudi FDA launched in September 2018.

Closing remarks: Dr Tom Frieden, President and CEO, Resolve to Save Lives

Dr Frieden closed the side event pointing out the importance of rigorous science and regulatory capacity to monitor and enforce iTFA policies; the power of regional action (case study of Saudi Arabia and the GCC); the power of consumers and the importance of having cohesive public and scientific messaging, as well as the necessity to address iTFAs not only regarding foods sold to consumers, but also in the context of business-to-business sales of oils and foods (case study of Slovenia); and the significance of multisectoral opportunities and policies that address the entire supply chain from oil crops to the foods and products purchased by consumers.



The first annual report published by WHO will provide the basis to benchmark progress on iTFA elimination each year.

Dr Frieden concluded by reiterating that optimism is important: *“iTfAs are low-hanging fruit – they are a unique NCD risk factor which can be eliminated. A win here will lead us elsewhere in the fight against NCDs.”*



[NCD Alliance](#) unites 2,000 civil society organisations in more than 170 countries, dedicated to improving NCD prevention and control worldwide. The mission of NCD Alliance is to unite and strengthen civil society to stimulate collaborative advocacy, action and accountability.



The five-year, \$225 million [Resolve to Save Lives](#) initiative has been funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is led by Dr. Tom Frieden, former director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and housed at Vital Strategies, which works in 60 countries with the vision of a world where every person is protected by a strong public health system.