Europe’s policymakers call for action on industrially produced trans fatty acids in foods in the European Union

Brussels, 14 April 2015:

The impact of industrially produced trans fatty acids (TFAs) on the health of citizens in the European Union (EU) will be debated today by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), representatives of the European Commission and WHO Europe.

The panel debate, which takes place in the European Parliament, Brussels is an initiative of the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) Heart Group, with the support of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and of the European Heart Network (EHN).

Industrially produced TFAs are widely recognised as the most harmful type of dietary fat with detrimental effects on health. In particular, TFAs significantly increase the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD). It may also increase risk of other chronic diseases.

These fats are produced by adding hydrogen to vegetable oil and are used as ingredients in some processed foods, including biscuits and ready meals.

To date, only three EU Member States - Austria, Denmark and Hungary - have adopted legislation to restrict industrially produced TFAs in the food chain. It is estimated that thousands of lives and billions of euros could be saved if these measures were introduced more widely.

In 2008, the European Parliament published a study recommending that a ban on industrially produced TFAs should be considered at EU level. In 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that the information available was sufficient to recommend reducing significantly or virtually eliminating industrially produced TFAs from the food supply. In December 2014 the European Commission was expected to present a report on the presence of trans fats in foods and in overall diet in the EU population.

Commenting on the importance of addressing TFA intake with legislative measures, Ms Mairead McGuinness MEP and Ms Karin Kadenbach MEP, Co-Chairs of the MEP Heart Group, said: “Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer in Europe, causing 1.9 million deaths every year. Today, we call upon the European Commission to bring forward a proposal for an EU-wide regulation to address this important health issue.”

Expressing WHO’s support for the initiative, Dr Roberto Bertollini, Director of WHO Brussels and Chief scientist of WHO Europe, said: “We encourage the EU to introduce a regulation mandating an upper limit of industrially produced trans fatty acids in food. TFAs are not safe for use and are associated to a number of negative health consequences which could and should be prevented by better regulation.”

Experiences from Denmark and New York show that TFAs can be replaced with healthier substitutes without increasing the cost or reducing the quality of foods.
Prof Steen Stender, keynote speaker from the University of Copenhagen, adds “Since the mid-1970s, average intake of TFAs in Europe has dropped considerably. However, average intake masks differences in consumption levels between different countries and social groups. Notably, people from economically disadvantaged groups are likely to consume more TFAs by way of diet consisting of more processed foods. It is important that we act now.”

Any reduction in cardiovascular diseases will result in major health gains and reductions in health inequalities. Without a regulatory intervention, inequalities in cardiovascular mortality, linked to TFAs intake, could increase in the EU. Inequalities in mortality from cardiovascular diseases account for almost half of the excess mortality in lower socio-economic groups in most European countries.iii

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Notes to Editor

About Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)
CVD is the main cause of death in the EU accounting for over 1.9 million deaths each year; CHD is the single most common cause of death in the EU accounting for over 680 000 deaths every year. These diseases are estimated to cost the EU economy almost € 196 billion per year.iv

About the MEP Heart Group
The main objective of the MEP Heart Group is to promote measures that will help reduce the burden of CVD in the European Union and to raise awareness of the disease among target audiences through a series of dedicated activities. The MEP Heart Group is led by two Co-Chairs, Ms Mairead McGuinness (EPP, IE) and Ms Karin Kadenbach (S&D, AT). The European Society of Cardiology and the European Heart Network provide support to the MEP Heart Group by running its Secretariat. www.mepheartgroup.eu

About the European Society of Cardiology
The European Society of Cardiology (ESC) represents more than 80 000 cardiology professionals across Europe and the Mediterranean. Its mission is to reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease in Europe. www.escardio.org

About the European Heart Network
The European Heart Network (EHN) is a Brussels-based alliance of heart foundations and like-minded non-governmental organisations throughout Europe. EHN has member organisations in 25 countries. EHN plays a leading role in the prevention and reduction of cardiovascular diseases, in particular heart disease and stroke, through advocacy, networking, capacity building and patient support, so that they are no longer a major cause of premature death and disability throughout Europe. www.ehnheart.org

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Prof. Dr Johan P. Mackenbach, *Health Inequalities: Europe in Profile* 2006

European Cardiovascular Disease Statistics 2012, European Society of Cardiology, European Heart Network