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India@75: Freedom from trans fats by 2022

By Govinda

In a meeting held with Vanaspati and edible oil manufacturers, public health experts and consumer organizations yesterday, FSSAI has in principle decided to bring down the trans-fatty acids (TFA) in Vanaspati /bakery shortenings/margarine to less than 2% in a phased manner, that would effectively bring the level of trans fats to zero level in food in India. Many countries around the world, such as Denmark, Chile, Norway, Singapore, South Africa and Equador already limit trans-fat in all foods to 2%, while a few other countries such as Austria, Hungary and Latvia limit it to 2% level with some exceptions. Recently, the UN Health Agency, WHO has given a call to eliminate industrially-produced trans-fat from the food supply by 2023 and has released an action package 'REPLACE' for the same.

Industrially produced trans-fatty acids are bad fats, created artificially during hydrogenation process while making partially hydrogenated vegetable oils (PHVOs). PHVOs are the major source of trans-fatty acids in India. These are majorly present in the following categories of fats/oils:

- Vanaspati: Used in preparation of mithai (such as laddoo/imarti/jalebi), deep fried foods such as aloo tikki, etc.
- Margarine and bakery shortenings: Used in preparation of bakery products (cakes/pastries/puffs etc.)

Further, trans-fatty acids are also formed during repeated heating of fats/oils while deep frying at home and restaurants. Research has shown that higher intakes of industrially produced trans-fatty acids (>1% of total energy intake) are associated with increased risk of high cholesterol and heart diseases. Globally, more than 500,000 deaths in 2010 were attributed to increased intake of trans-fatty acids. Industrially produced trans-fatty acids can be easily eliminated by adopting newer technologies which allow use of healthier oils in place of partially hydrogenated vegetable oils at negligible costs. Some amount of trans-fatty acids are also present naturally in animal sources such as milk and dairy products. When consumed in moderation, the natural trans-fatty acids are not known to have adverse health effects.

Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI, said "Through this, we are planning to achieve less than 2% TFA content by 2022, a year ahead of the global target to eliminate industrially-produced trans-fat from the food supply by the year 2023. We hope that this initiative will drive the market for trans-fat free products in the future. He further added that TFA reduction in PHVOs from 5% to 2% will be carried out in a phased manner by the industry. The industry would come on board by signing

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the agreement to reduce industrially produced TFA content in fats/oils to less than 2% by 2022. The FSSAI commits to facilitate industries in capacity building for the smooth transition.”

With the consensus developed on less than 2% level of TFA in fats/oils, this would now be taken up by the food authority for approval and a draft will be notified soon. The final regulation will take around 3-4 months.