

Reducing trans fats content in foods to 2% by 2022 is possible: Experts

Monday, 24 August, 2020

Our Bureau, New Delhi

Covid-19 has created havoc across the world and in countries like India, it has tested the resilience of our health systems greatly. With nearly 5.8 million dying annually of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), India already had a heavy disease burden in the pre-pandemic times. It has now become clear that people battling from NCDs are at a greater risk of mortality and severe symptoms from Covid-19. The high prevalence of NCDs in the country coupled with the pandemic has hugely aggravated the burden on the health system.

Health experts in India and across the world are now urging governments to focus on eliminating industrially produced Trans Fats from the Indian food system. A deadly chemical that directly causes more than half a million deaths worldwide, trans fats is considered a dietary risk factor for several non-communicable diseases including diabetes and some forms of cancer. Reducing TFAs (Trans Fatty Acids) content in fats, oils and all foods to no more than 2% by 2022 is an achievable goal.

Addressing the issue recently, Arun Singhal, CEO, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), emphasised India's commitment to regulate this toxin in foods. He said, "A number of steps have been taken including a draft regulation limiting trans fats to 2% in edible oils and fats and another one imposing similar limit in foods. This is in keeping with our goal that when India celebrates its 75th year of freedom, we will be free of trans fats."

Sunil Bakshi, head (regulations/Codex/international cooperation), FSSAI, reiterated the regulating body's confidence in India's promise of reducing TFAs to 3% by January 2021 and 2% by January 2022.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified removing TFA from global food systems a 'best buy' (i.e., a measure that is cost-effective and feasible to implement) that can have an exponential positive impact on global health. According to Dr Francesco Branca, director of nutrition for health and development at WHO, "India must take banning trans fats seriously because about 10% of coronary heart diseases in the country are a result of TFA intake."

There is considerable global momentum with more and more countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Chile and Saudi Arabia, taking firm steps to limit TFA in foods. Applauding India's proactive leadership in the matter, Vandana Shah, regional director, South Asia Programs at GHAI, said, "FSSAI's initiative to lower TFA limits will save many lives and India could

become a model for other countries in the region to better protect their citizens from the harms of TFA. There is an opportunity for India to learn from countries like Thailand, Chile and Brazil on how they have successfully dealt with the TFA reduction process.”

Ashim Sanyal, COO, Consumer Voice, raised a concern that shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to push the poor to consume cheaper food items and hence more trans fat laden food. He also cautioned about the closing deadline for meeting these targets. “We may run short of time to meet the January 2021 implementation target. It takes at least 6 months to 1 year to build capacities of state food departments, put in place food testing mechanisms and allow industry to take the right measures.”

In India, highest levels of TFA are present in vanaspati, commonly used as vegetable ghee for household cooking, and consumed in bakery items, sweets, street food and packaged foods. TFA intake is responsible for more than 500,000 premature deaths from coronary heart disease each year around the world. Due to the high toll of TFA consumption, eliminating industrially produced TFA is a global health priority.