

## 40% of Punjabis are Overweight : Call to Eliminate Artificial Trans Fats

### The state has a high incidence of cardiac disease

Punjabis, known for their intake of a rich diet, might be sitting on a trans fatty acids time bomb.

An influx of artificial trans fats in our diets is to blame, emphasised a group of experts, sounding the clarion to eliminate trans fatty acids, or TFAs, from dietary oils and fats and foods.

The interaction was organised by the Department of Community Medicine, School of Public Health, PGIMER, and the Strategic Institute for Public Health Education and Research, SIPHER, Chandigarh.

Consuming artificial TFAs can increase the risk of death due to heart attack by 28% in the state, they said.

Natural or ruminant TFAs are found in paneer, butter, milk and meats and are considered relatively harmless. Not so with artificial, industrially produced trans fats, found in margarine and vanaspati, used in preparing the baked goods, snacks and fried foods which a large section of the Punjabi population finds irresistible.

Health experts flagged the high consumption of trans fats in the state.

While existing regulations limit the trans-fat content to 5% by weight in vegetable fats, oils, bakery and industrial margarine and vanaspati, it is challenging for the under-resourced Food Safety and Standards Authority of India to reach unregistered and unauthorised street vendors of food who make a rich meal.

In a country where nearly half of children below 5 are underweight, and only about 5% are overnourished, it is not well known that trans fats pose a health risk that needs to be addressed.

It is undoubtedly the food department that plays a pivotal role in implementing measures to keep a check on the percentage of trans-fats at the manufacturer, distributor, food business operator, and consumer levels, they stressed.

They stressed that it is high time the public says No to artificial trans-fats given the adverse health effects. The scientific evidence is that consuming trans-fats may increase the risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, obesity, colon cancer, etc.

A newsletter released by the PGIMER quotes K.S Pannu, commissioner for Food and Drug Administration in Punjab:

“Numerous studies have shown that 40 % of Punjab’s population is overweight or obese. Considering the alarming figures, the government of Punjab is committed to take all necessary actions in accordance with guidelines listed by FSSAI to reduce trans-fats in oils, fats and food products.”

In 2011 the Indian government set a TFA limit of 10% in oils and fats which was further reduced to 5% in 2015. In December 2018 the FSSAI proposed to reduce it to 3% by 2021 and 2% the following year. A draft notification issued by the government is pending ratification in this regard.

The manufacture, distribution, storage and sale of cooking-medium admixtures of ghee and anything not exclusively derived from milk fat, or vanaspati to which ghee or any other substance have been added, have been prohibited in Punjab since early this year.

But the question remains about the implementation of these orders on the ground.

Experts observe that hypertension deaths and trans-fat consumption in Punjab are the highest in the country, and the state also has a higher instance of cardiovascular disease.

Various stakeholders have joined hands in the state to take the message of giving up trans-fats to the streets. Campaigns aimed at generating awareness, through cyclathons and other events, are underway in the districts.

At the recent interaction, Dr Poonam Khanna of the PGIMER said that “Every extra gram of trans fatty acids consumed per day will increase the risk of heart attack or heart disease by about 5%.”

Highlighting the figures from the World Health Organization, Dr Khanna said that trans-fat intake leads to over 500,000 deaths from cardiovascular diseases around the globe every year.

Another expert Dr Rakesh Gupta while answering a query on trans-fats causing kidney failure, said:

“Saturated fats increase the levels of albuminuria, a protein which the kidney does not allow to be passed from the blood to urine. However, more research needs to be done. People with cardiovascular diseases or at higher risk of heart disease have to be more cautious about the selection of cooking oil consumed as food.”

They pointed out that initially vanaspati was classified as healthy, tasty and a cheaper alternative to pure ghee, because people were ignorant about bad food fats. This led to people introducing vanaspati into their diets.

There was a call from the experts to develop effective policy measures for TFA elimination that can be implemented and sustained in Punjab and across the country.