

Fat-free approach: FSSAI is trying to make India vanaspati free

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All of us want to lead a healthy life, but there are hurdles in achieving this goal. Inability to avoid cooking oils containing trans-fats or trans fatty acids (TFA) and lack of awareness about our eating habits, are the two prime problems.

It has been scientifically proven, that the use of TFA is fraught with major health issues. Despite this, consumption of oils is high. Besides, cut-throat competition has resulted in large-scale production of vegetable oils using the hydrogenation process, which jacks up the content of TFA. Oil-makers resort to this process as it is cost effective and increases shelf life.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Foods Standards and Safety Authority of India (FSSAI) are working in tandem to eliminate the presence of TFA from industrially produced cooking oils. But the progress towards the elimination of trans fats (which means restricting their presence to 0.2%) has been slow.

To begin with, FSSAI put in place a regulation in 2016 halving the permissible quantum of trans-fats in edible fats and oils from 10% to 5%. On its part, WHO launched a REPLACE campaign in 2018 for global-level elimination of trans-fats in industrially produced edible oils by 2023. The Indian regulator has got more ambitious, setting 2022 as the deadline.

FSSAI plans to cap TFA at 3% by 2021 and 2% by 2022 in edible fats and oils. The resolution is yet to become a regulation.

According to a WHO report, Indian snacks contain 6-30% of TFA, far exceeding the safe limit of 2%. One survey of street food in Delhi and Haryana found that 25% of snacks contained high TFA levels. Snacks such as samosa, gulab jamun and jalebi prepared in vanaspati-a

primary dietary source for trans fats prepared by adding hydrogen to the cheap edible oils- reportedly contained 50% of fat in the form of TFA.

Consumption of trans fats beyond the prescribed limit disrupts good and bad cholesterol (HDL and LDL) levels, causing dyslipidemia, heart diseases, diabetes, liver dysfunction, fertility issues, Alzheimer's disease, depression and some types of cancer. This is also the reason that India has witnessed an escalation in DALYs attributable to NCDs.

Considering all these aspects, FSSAI launched an awareness campaign "Heart attack rewind." Through another initiative, the authority launched a "Trans Fat Free" logo for voluntary labelling to promote TFA-free products. The label can be used by bakeries, local food outlets and shops for preparations containing TFA not exceeding 0.2 per 100 g/ml. Offering subsidies on edible oils with healthier nutrient profiles could be another approach. Authorities should not promote consumption of saturated fats as part of the trans fat free movement. These are also associated with health hazards.

The need to achieve the goal before the 2022 deadline cannot be over-emphasised, considering the high stakes.