

FSSAI caps trans fatty acids to 2% in all oils & fats by Jan 2022 to prevent thousands of deaths

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India has unveiled regulations to limit trans fat in oils and fats, an important step for public health that will prevent thousands of deaths every year. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has announced that all edible refined oils, vanaspati, bakery shortening, margarines, vegetable fat spreads and mixed fat spreads may only contain up to 3 per cent trans fats by January 2021 and 2 per cent or less trans fats by January 2022. The move is the first step by FSSAI towards fulfilling its commitments made in 2018 to reduce trans-fats in both edible oils and in all foods.

Consumption of trans fats is associated with increased risk of heart diseases. According to 2017 estimates, India has one of the highest burden of heart disease deaths due to high trans-fat intake out of all countries in the world. More than 1.5 million deaths take place each year due to coronary heart disease, and nearly 5 per cent of these deaths each year (71,000) can be attributed to trans fats intake.

Dr Naresh Trehan, India's foremost cardiologist and chairman, Medanta Hospital, Gurgaon, said, "Industrially produced trans fatty acid is a toxic chemical that clogs our arteries and is a risk factor for heart attack and other diseases. Eliminating this harmful chemical from our food system can save many lives. I commend FSSAI for enacting this important regulation and setting an example for the South Asian region."

Further explaining how trans fatty acid damages the heart, he said, "Intake of trans fatty acid not only has no health benefits, it increases bad cholesterol or LDL while decreasing good cholesterol or HDL in the body. LDL or low density cholesterol is dangerous because it can penetrate through the protective layer of arteries and start building up plaque on the arterial walls. Plainly put, high consumption of trans fatty acid rich food raises your risk for cardiovascular diseases and death."

The notification of this regulation is a critical step since the World Health Organisation (WHO) had called for global elimination of trans fat by 2023. According to WHO's Replace second annual report released in September 2020, around 40 countries have already enacted the best practice policies to eliminate trans fats. These best practice policies limit industrially produced levels of trans fats to 2 per cent or less of total fats in all foods. The new regulations announced by FSSAI will bring levels of trans fats in all

fats and oils down to the level recommended by the WHO.

Applauding this important regulatory step, Vandana Shah, regional director, South Asia Programmes at Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids and Global Health Advocacy Incubator, said, "India joins the growing number of countries, including Brazil and Turkey, who are taking steps to follow the WHO's call to eliminate industrially produced trans fat from their food supply by 2023. FSSAI's leadership and initiative to make India trans fatty acid free could become a model for other countries in the region to better protect their citizens from this toxic ingredient."

Consumer organisations leaders have also welcomed this new regulation. Ashim Sanyal, COO, Consumer VOICE, said, "India has achieved a lifesaving milestone with FSSAI regulating trans fats to 3 per cent now and 2 per cent by 2022 in oils and fats. This comes at the time of a pandemic where the NCD burden has risen. Cardiovascular diseases along with diabetes are proving fatal for covid patients. The missing element of trans fats in all foods is a pain point and hopefully FSSAI will address this as well before January 2022 to eliminate chemical trans fatty acids from the Indian platter."

Besides committing to limiting the amount of trans-fats in edible oils and fats, the FSSAI had also released a draft notification in 2019 seeking to reducing the levels of trans-fats in all foods, which is still to be enacted. Once adopted, this additional regulation, will place India in the ranks of countries with best practice trans-fat policies in place, according to WHO standards.

Sanyal added that for a fuller protection, "It is important now that FSSAI enacts the same regulation in foods and focus on the enforcement in edible oil and food industries to reach the goal of trans fats free India by 2022."

Industrially produced trans fats are created artificially during the hydrogenation processes of vegetable oils, and resulting in partially hydrogenated vegetable oils (PHVOs). PHVOs are the major source of trans fats in India and are found in vanaspati, margarines, and shortenings. Vanaspati is used in preparation of Indian traditional sweets (mithais) such as laddoo, imarti, jalebi, and deep-fried foods such as aloo tikki and bhatura. Margarine and bakery shortenings are the most common fats used in baked goods such as cakes, pastries, and puffs. Some trans fats are also formed during manufacturing process when a high temperature refinement process is used to create vegetable oils. Experts in the edible oil industry say that technologies are available to make trans fats free products for baking and frying.