

Envisaging a trans-fat free India? - A myth or reality

Dear Editor,

In our routine diets, two comprehensive types of trans-fats are observed. The first types are originated from animals (e.g., meat and dairy products) and another are naturally produced trans fats. Additionally, artificial trans fats (hydrogenated) are used in the industries to make vegetable oils more solid, long lasting. Structurally, one or more double bonds are present in the *Trans* fatty acids instead of the common *Cis* structure.^[1]

Processed food is the primary dietary source for trans-fats.^[2] Trans-fats are cost-effective to produce, easy to use and they last long. They give foods a pleasant texture and taste, that's why they are desired especially by vanaspati industry for the preparation of sweets and fried foods as it provides durability as well as emulsion stability to the bakery products.^[3] Traditionally, in many parts of India, people like consuming fried foods rich in fats, many food outlets and restaurants use it for its longer shelf-life. Additionally, we have a food culture to reuse the unused oil, again and again, which also generates trans-fats. Taking an example of a simple potato chips packet, the overall selling cost in market is usually 10–15 times more than its manufacturing cost. A recent trend in the food industries is supply of packed, easy to take away fast food items like *samosas*, *matheis* (a kind of salted snacks) etc., The question is simple. Why this all is happening?

It is because trans-fats are more profitable and revenue-generating for the food industries but on the other side, on a primary care perspective, they are equally against the right to health for the people.^[1]

Based on scientific evidence, Food and Drug Administration (USA) instituted labeling regulations for trans-fat on foods containing them and eventually consumption of food containing trans-fats reduced drastically. India is also committed to eliminate industrial trans-fat in fats/oils and in foods containing fat/oils in a phased manner. The trans-fat content in fats and oils has already been reduced to less than 5% and further it will be reduced to 3% by 2021 and to 2% by 2022.^[3] In this regard, *Food Safety and Standards Authority of India* (FSSAI) specifies that trans-fat free claims can be made on the foods which contain 0.02 gm trans-fat per 100 gm/100 ml. Furthermore, to encourage bakeries, sweet shops, food outlets, etc., on minimum use of trans-fat in foods as per set standards, it was notified that such establishments can display “Trans Fat-Free” logo on their outlets and food products. It was our Union Cabinet Minister of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) who officially launched the “Trans Fat-Free” logo, on 4th October 2018, at the 08th International Chefs Conference setting a movement against trans-fat. All this set out a right pace to accelerate the ‘Eat Right India’ movement which is led by (FSSAI), under the

aegis of MOHFW. In India, FSSAI, the apex food regulator has launched an enormous battle against industrially produced trans-fats to reduce it to 2% by 2022.^[3] Additionally, in the longer run, FSSAI has also taken a vow to completely eradicate it from the Indian food system. In line with the WHO's (World Health Organization's) programme called “REPLACE,” the FSSAI has recognized the threat trans-fats pose for a healthy diet system and have commenced several programmes to find alternatives for manufacturing products and have also sensitized the food industry for this purpose.^[4]

Additionally, India (Punjab) launched a “Trans-fat free Diwali campaign” ahead of the festival season in October 2020 in collaboration with three partners which included, the Department of Community Medicine and School of Public Health, PGIMER, Chandigarh, Strategic Institute for Public Health and Education Research (SIPHER), and Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI).

The main aim of the campaign was to generate awareness among the policy makers, primary care physicians, and related stakeholders about the negative health consequences of trans-fats.^[5] As primary health center is the first point of contact with the patients, we assume that primary care physicians should be made aware of the negative health consequences of the trans fats to their patients.

At the end of the day, people must know how and why trans-fats are bad for their health. What are other alternatives to trans-fats? Knowing all this, they may get discouraged from using trans fats. It's not such that an alternative was not prescribed, one such way out is Inter-Esterified Fat (IEF) which is produced enzymatically but currently, it is being tested for its safe consumption and it may take time to reach in the markets for human consumption at large.

Now the moot question is that despite the huge amount of evidence against the use of trans-fat in diet and tremendous efforts from the FSSAI to eliminate it from the food chain. Why is it that the authorities are not acting up to the desired level in eliminating trans-fats from the diets? It may be due to multiple direct and indirect reasons, firstly, it is the conflicting nature of policies that are obstructing us from replacing fast foods/unhealthy foods to healthier foods, such as imposing a higher tax on junk foods or a complete ban on junk foods. Secondly, it may be due to competing priorities of a country like- nations healthy food environment is sometimes in conflict with the economic growth of that country. As an example, the budgetary cost of a 20-second advertising cold drink product on television during prime time is estimated to be much higher than a yearly budgetary allowance approved to run a nationwide health programme in

India. Presently obesity crisis is costing South Africa \$48.8 billion per year, this negative socio-economic consequences of South Africa is surely attributed to the myopic vision of the policy makers and it could be averted by making right food policies.^[6]

Public health advocacy has its role and we have even witnessed imposition of tax on tobacco, alcohol, sugary drinks, and other items. But in this case, it would be suicidal for any nation to continue with tax imposition over use of trans-fat diet rather than eliminating it from the food chain.

People should be educated to eat a healthy dietary product like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and many more. Also limit red meat and sugary foods and beverages.

Indeed, this is a welcome step, authorities are in a process to eliminate trans-fat to 2% till 2022. Time will tell how strongly and determined we will go through the process. Ultimately, the political economy must play a dominating role on the policy process. Now it is the high time for us to observe the results of 'The Eat Right Movement' at the ground level where it has been actually implemented. Although it can slow down the countries' economy, due to potential revenue and job loss from the fast-food industry. We assume that, to make a balanced food tax policy for India is the need of the hour which can look after the India's overall economic growth, social, and political context in a coherent manner and prevent the catastrophic health impacts.

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