

CUTTING TRANS FAT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON HEALTHIER FOOD

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Come January 1, 2022, India will join a select group of countries [limiting industrial trans fat to 2%](#) by mass of the total oils/fats present in the product. India would thus be achieving the WHO target a year in advance. In mid-2016, the [trans fat](#) content limit was halved from 10% to 5%, and in December 2020, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) [capped it to 3% by 2021](#). While trans fat is naturally present in red meat and dairy products, the focus is on restricting the industrially produced trans fat used solely to prolong the shelf life of products at less cost. While the government's notification specifically mentions edible oils and fats that are used as ingredients, it also applies to emulsions such as margarines. Targeting these ingredients would in effect result in reducing the trans fat content to 2% in all food items as these two are the major sources of industrial trans fat. Also, even when the fat/oil contains less than 2% trans fat, repeated use at high temperature can increase the trans fat content. The focus on cutting down trans fat content in food arises from its proclivity to negatively alter the lipoprotein cholesterol profile by increasing the level of bad cholesterol (LDL) while decreasing the level of HDL or good cholesterol. These changes in the lipoprotein cholesterol profile increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

In 2004, when Denmark became the first country to limit industrially produced trans fat content in all foods to 2% of fats and oils, it faced resistance from much of Europe, including the European Commission. However, many countries have since adopted similar restrictions themselves. In fact, in April 2019, the European Union (EU) adopted a new regulation — from April 2021 — to limit the amount of industrially produced trans fat to 2% in all foods sold within the EU. According to a 2020 report of WHO, 32 countries already have some form of mandatory limits on trans fat. The benefits of reducing trans fat can become quickly apparent, as seen in Denmark; three years after the cap came into effect, it saw a reduction of about 14 deaths attributable to cardiovascular diseases per 1,00,000 population. It is now well known that trans fat can be completely eliminated and replaced with healthier substitutes without any change in the food taste or cost. According to WHO, a dozen large multinational food companies have already committed to eliminate industrially produced trans fat from all their products by 2023. With a year's notice, it should be possible for the multinational food companies to redouble their efforts to meet the FSSAI standard, while Indian companies that have earlier been able to cut the level of trans fat as in the FSSAI limit, should have no excuse not to meet the current capping.

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