

Trans-fats must go from Indian foods by 2022: Experts

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Arun Singhal, CEO of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), emphasised India's commitment to regulate this toxin in foods. (Representational)

WITH CLOSE to 5.8 million people dying of non-communicable diseases (NCD) annually, India already had a heavy disease burden before the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) struck. It has now become clear that people battling NCDs are at greater risk of mortality and severe symptoms from the viral infection. The high prevalence of NCDs coupled with the pandemic has aggravated the burden on the health system.

Experts in India and across the world are now urging governments to focus on eliminating industrially produced trans-fats from the Indian food system. A chemical directly causing more than half a million deaths worldwide, trans fat is considered a dietary risk factor for several NCDs, including diabetes and some forms of [cancer](#). Reducing trans-fatty acids (TFA) content in fats, oils, and all foods to no more than 2 per cent by 2022 is an achievable goal.

Arun Singhal, CEO of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), emphasised India's commitment to regulate this toxin in foods. In a statement, he said, "A number of steps have been taken, including a draft regulation limiting trans fats to 2 per cent in edible oils and fats, and another one imposing a similar limit in foods. This is in keeping with our goal that when India celebrates its 75th year of independence, we will be free of trans fats."

Sunil Bakshi, head (Regulations/Codex/International Cooperation), FSSAI, said the regulatory body was confident of India's promise of reducing TFA to 3 per cent by January 2021 and 2 per cent by January 2022.

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According to Dr Francesco Branca, director of nutrition for health and development at WHO, "India must take banning trans-fats seriously because about 10 per cent of coronary heart diseases in the country are a result of TFA intake."

There is considerable global momentum with more countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Chile, Saudi Arabia, taking firm steps to limit TFA. Applauding India's "proactive" leadership in the matter, Vandana Shah, regional director, South Asia Programs at Global Health Advocacy Incubator, said, "The FSSAI's initiative to lower TFA limits will save many lives and India could become a model for other countries in the region to better protect their citizens from the harms of TFA. There is an opportunity for India to learn from countries like Thailand, Chile and Brazil."

Ashim Sanyal, COO, Consumer VOICE, raised a concern that "shocks" like the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to push the poor to consume cheaper food items and, hence, more trans-fat laden food. He also cautioned about the closing deadline for meeting these targets.

"We may run short of time to meet the January 2021 implementation target. It takes at least six months to one year to build capacities of state food departments, put in place food testing mechanisms, and allow industry to take the right measures."

In India, highest levels of TFA are present in *vanaspati*, commonly used as vegetable ghee for household cooking, and consumed in bakery items, sweets, street food, and packaged foods