

Experts see fast food industry willing and on track to eliminate trans fats

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Experts are of the opinion that fast food industry is willing and on track to eliminate trans fats. The move follows noting that prolonged high consumption of trans fatty acids (TFAs) increases the risk of non-communicable diseases and death. Globally, approximately half a million people succumb to coronary heart disease (CHD) that can be directly linked to TFA consumption. In India, this number is as high as 72,000 people annually.

The industry can play an important role in eliminating this harmful chemical from oils, fats, and food by adopting the WHO recommended threshold of less than 2% trans fats by 2023. At an online discussion organised by CII SKA - Face and Consumer Voice, on World Food Day, several major industry leaders came together to discuss how Indian fast food is taking important steps in that direction.

“It makes perfect business sense for us to quickly adopt this healthier threshold as consumers are more aware now. Industry actually welcomes this step towards a healthier direction. Technological advancement has ensured that we can easily achieve this goal. The organised food and oil sector is already prepared and have taken steps to ensure that TFA content is well within the prescribed limits. Production of vanaspati, which is the primary source of TFA, has already stagnated,” said Dr Prabodh Halde, head, global regulatory, Marico.

According to Biprabuddha Chatterjee, head, R&D, Adani Wilmar, the market leaders of vanaspati industry, which is the main source of TFA in India, shared that it was relatively simple to reduce levels of TFA in oils and hydrogenated fats.

“Challenge lays in converting foods that require a solid fat ingredient such as all bakery and confectionery products. We supply these complicated fats to major MNCs across the world such as Nestle and Cadbury. To remain at par with the best standards of food safety, we had to achieve the target of TFA elimination much earlier. I am happy to announce that since 2019, our fats and oils have been TFA-free,” said Chatterjee.

Allaying a general concern that the technology required to eliminate TFA can be expensive, Devender Yadav, VP, quality, food safety and regulatory, Jubilant FoodWorks, shared that his company has already reduced the level of hydrogenated fats with alternate fats in their products and that this transition has been cost-effective.

“All our offerings and products are trans-fat free. We are continuously working on to implementing alternate options. It’s a journey, so we are also working on to reducing sugar, salt level from our food products as well.”

Indian regulatory authority FSSAI has already taken important steps. Two proposed draft regulations limiting TFA to 3% and 2% by January 2021 and 2022 respectively are waiting to be notified and implemented.

Dr Rubeena Shaheen, director, standards, FSSAI, said, “We can achieve the target of 2% TFA following the WHO guidelines by the given time. Yes, states will have to enforce but FSSAI has been taking several steps and initiatives through different media and workshops to educate consumers too.”

Ashim Sanyal, COO, Consumer Voice, pointed out that in countries like India, actual implementation of TFA limits can face huge challenges due to the large unorganised food sector. “Sensitisation and capacity building of these medium and small size food industries will be extremely critical. Alternatives are already available. We just need to get them applied in eradicating trans fat from our food supplies.”