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Fat lot of HARM

Trans fat in commercially fried and processed food is more hazardous than dietary cholesterol

Sanchita Sharma

ARTERY-CLOGGING trans fat is becoming unacceptable world over, but not in India. The reason is that the hazards of this heart-threatening cooking oil have not yet sunk in even among educated, urban consumers.

"The health impact of trans fats is far worse than other dietary component. It is even more harmful than bad cholesterol. This may be a prime reason — given our penchant of frying food in reheated oil, which increases trans fat content rapidly — of the high prevalence of the metabolic syndrome and diabetes in Indians," says Anoop Misra, director, department of Diabetes and Metabolic Diseases, Fortis Hospital.

Cutting back on trans fat food intake brings immediate benefits. "Denmark banned trans fat in 2004 and within two years, achieved a 20 per cent reduction in heart disease," says Dr B Siva Kumar, former deputy director, National Institutes of Nutrition, Hyderabad.

Trans fat has been part of the urban diet for decades, enhancing the taste and shelf life of popular packaged food products. "This cheap and harmful oil is used as an ingredient in products that range from biscuits and instant noodles to deep-fried *samosas* and French fries," says Siva Kumar.

Trans fats are formed when liquid oil turn into solid fats. In the absence of the mandatory use of the term 'trans fat' in labels in India, the processed food industry lists trans fat as 'partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils', 'hydrogenated vegetable oils', or 'vegetable shortening'. The list of ingredients on the pack of biscuits your child munches all day is likely to have trans fat under one of these terms.

Radhika Arora, the mother of nine-year-old Adya, was horrified when she discovered

the instant noodles her daughter lives on had trans fats. "There is need for greater clarity in food labelling. I knew instant noodles were not healthy but I did not know the fat used there was worse for health than the fat found in red meats, which we gave up eating three years ago," says the 37-year-old advertising executive.

Eliminating trans fat isn't simply about replacing partially hydrogenated oils with a healthy oil. "Trans fats are used in commercial recipes not only because they are cheap but also because they make the food taste better. Replacing it would involve changing the recipe because the flavour of the product would change," says Siva Kumar.

Some companies, though, who sell their products on a health platform will make he effort to change their ingredients. It has happened in the US already. Kraft Foods has removed trans fats from Triscuits and Oreos and is now working on other cookies and crackers. In some cases, like Triscuit, the removal of trans fat didn't make a difference, but trans fat-free Oreo is less creamy and crispy than the original.

"All Frito Lay brands — such as Lays, Kurkure, Cheetos, Uncle Chips, Lehar — are made in natural vegetable refined oils and do not have any trans fatty acids. Within a couple of months, our packs will be clearly labelled trans fat-free," says Dr T.S.R. Murali, technology director, Fritolay.

The World Health Organisation says all governments should phase out trans-fat if labelling alone doesn't spur reduction in consumption. "Labelling will certainly have an impact but only among those who can read English. Hard and legally persuasive options like banning the trans fats in commercial cooking, forcing companies to use trans fat-free oil in packaged foods, and making restaurants use healthy oils will be more effective in decreasing consumption," says Misra.

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TRANS FAT

Trans fat is formed from a chemical process known as "partial hydrogenation" used to convert liquid oils into a semi-solid form. The body is unable to break down trans fat, causing it to accumulate in the body.

Where are trans fats found?

Trans fats are found in most processed foods, such as:

- Spreads. Hard margarine is loaded with trans and saturated fats.
- Packaged foods, especially cake and pancake mixes.
- Instant soups and noodle kits.
- Fast foods such as french fries and fried chicken.
- Frozen food. Pies, waffles, pizzas and breaded fish.
- Baked goods. Doughnuts, muffins, cakes, etc.
- Biscuits and crackers. Shortening provides the crispy texture.
- Breakfast cereal and energy bars.
- Cookies and candy.
- Toppings and dips. Non-dairy creamers and flavoured coffees, whipped toppings, gravy mixes and salad dressing are loaded with trans fats.

Why is trans fat used?

Processed food companies use trans fat because it improves the flavour and increases the shelf-life of the product.

Trans fat is also derived from less expensive oils, which keeps the costs down.

Trans fat is found in most commercially packaged goods, commercially fried foods such as French Fries and *samosas*, other packaged snacks such as microwaved popcorn, biscuits and chips.

What should consumers watch out for?

Look out for packaged food with a label that says 'partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils', 'hydrogenated vegetable oils', or 'vegetable shortening'. All these contain trans fat.

What is the health impact of consuming trans fat?

While saturated fat – found in butter, cheese, red meat, and coconut and palm oil – raise cholesterol levels, trans fat harms you further. It increases artery-clogging low-density lipoprotein (LDL or 'bad' cholesterol) and lowers heart-protecting high-density lipoprotein (HDL or 'good' cholesterol). Some studies have found it raises risk of diabetes.

What is the labelling requirement in India?

It is not mandatory to clearly use the term 'trans fat' in food labels. Food manufacturers use misleading terms such as 'partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils', 'hydrogenated oils', or simply, 'vegetable oils'.

How much trans fat is safe?

WHO recommends that trans fats should not be consumed at all. From September 1, 2007, the use of trans fats will have to be clearly listed on the food labels of all products manufactured in India.

