

# INDIA TODAY

## health DIET

■ By Damayanti Datta

If all this while you have been fretting about saturated fats and lipoproteins, here is one more health scare: trans fats. These are the cheap, chemically-treated fats the food industry loves, but our hearts and blood vessels don't. They lurk unrecognized in all those snacks and savouries that contain hydrogenated oils. These oils are preferred by restaurateurs because they can be repeatedly reheated without breaking down, and by food processors because they're resistant to rancidity. They also provide much of the comfort in comfort food, accounting for everything from the flavour of chips to the flaky layering of samosas to the stubborn moistness of jalebis. But the feel-good is only at the level of taste buds. Trans fats are 'killer fats' that create havoc in our body—hike up 'bad' cholesterol, lower the 'good' sort, clump blood platelets and clog the arteries. This has made trans fats a piñata for public health officials worldwide. But in India—where loss in man-years due to lifestyle diseases is the highest—trans fats are turning out to be public enemy *de jour*.

India now seems to be waking up to the new threat. The Union Health Ministry has just cornered this killer in the nation's kitchens. Trans fats are now thought to be so incontrovertibly bad for you that from August 2007 food manufacturers will have to compulso-



## TRANS FATS The New

India is one of the largest consumers of fast foods that

These are fast becoming a major cause of chronic life

The Government has made it mandatory for food manufa

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**MUNCHING ON JUNK:** 33 per cent of India's youth take trans fat-loaded food three times a week

rily mention their presence on product labels. Sensing that a new regulatory framework is on the anvil, companies are busy falling in line even as activists and physicians spread the word. But in a country where 80 per cent of trans fats come from street food—as revealed by the latest *National Report on Street Food Survey*—the drive to clean the nation's frying pans has stirred up a hornet's nest.

At the heart of the problem is the nation's huge appetite for fried foods. As one of the largest snack markets of the world, India consumes more than four lakh tonne of snacks every year. Three-fourths of this is made of 1,300 ethnic snacks and savouries. Edible oils command a fifth of the total food and beverages industry. "Fat consumption is spiralling with rising income and urban spread," reports K.T. Achaya of the Central Food Technological Research Institute, Mysore. The more fat-friendly the nation gets, deeper the trans fats dig into the food basket.

To many, the Government regulation is a step in the right direction. "The biggest source of trans fats in India is vanaspati, the ghee substitute," asserts Dr B. Sivakumar, former director of the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad. Hotels invariably use vanaspati. Ethnic sweets are loaded with vanaspati. Street foods, too, are laden with vanaspati. "It's hard to ensure that this is not used by restaurants and fast food vendors," he adds. Trans fat content in

edible oils manufactured by reputed companies might be below the acceptable 10 per cent, but in many local products, it varies from 15 per cent to as high as 40. "We don't have laws to regulate this," says Sivakumar.

But will it help Kishore Jadhav? The 43-year-old real estate developer from Kandivli, spends around Rs 100 on fast food every day. "With so many options, the easiest thing to do is to order a pizza," he says. Unfortunately for him, the new regulation doesn't require restaurants and fast-food joints to list out trans fat content. Jadhav claims he regularly checks food labels when shopping for new products. But surveys tell a different story. A 2006 ACNielsen study revealed that 46 per cent of Indian consumers can figure out food labels "only in part" and 5 per cent "not at all". Will putting trans fats on food labels help such consumers? Preeti Shah of Ahmedabad's Consumer Education & Research Centre is hopeful. "It's a step in the right direction," she holds. "Knowledge is power for consumers."

**A**t the bottom of the pyramid, but no less a target for trans fats, stands Kallu Sheikh, an electronic goods vendor and a regular customer at the Jain family's 200-year-old shop near Jama Masjid, at the heart of Old Delhi. He is one among the hungry crowd that throngs the narrow lanes of Chandni Chowk and stalls piled high with steaming samosas, golden jalebis, hot chapattis or spicy chaat. He is typical of the 4,800 people interviewed in 16 cities by the street food survey. Most of them are in the prime of life (59 per cent between age 35 and 50), overwhelmingly male (67 per cent), working class (31 per cent) with modest education (43 per cent between high school and graduation) and earning less than Rs 100 a day (34 per cent). Most of them have been frequenting mobile vendors daily for years (78 per cent for 10 years).

"Moving in a healthier direction is good," says Bijan Misra, consumer activist and executive director with Consumer Voice. "But mentioning trans fats in packaged food hardly addresses the problem." It's more a knee-jerk reaction, he feels, triggered by the trans fat food scare raging

## Threat

contain harmful trans fats.

stale diseases like heart attacks and strokes.

Manufacturers to put warning labels. But will it work?



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### WHAT ARE TRANS FATS & HOW THEY HIDE IN POPULAR FOODS

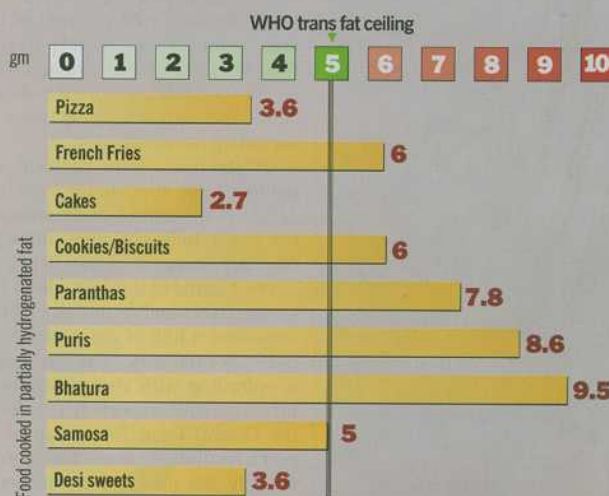
The WHO ceiling for trans fats is 5 gm a day. Are you within limits? Check out how your choicest snacks and savouries stack up

■ Trans fats are man-made and lurk unlabelled in a range of foods. These form when hydrogen atoms are added to vegetable oils at high temperature.

■ The food and beverage industry's best-loved fat, it's less likely to spoil, can be repeatedly recycled, has a less greasy feel and is fabulously cheap.

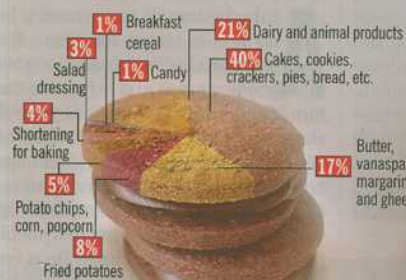
■ Trans fats clog linings of blood vessels and surfaces in the brain. They are linked to obesity, coronary and cholesterol problems, diabetes and other lifestyle diseases.

■ Vanaspati is the biggest source of trans fat in India. Commercial and street food producers invariably use vanaspati.



### The daily dose

The average trans fat content per serving



The average daily trans fat intake of an adult is approximately 5.8 gm, or 2.6% of calories. Hence, 1% equals 2 gm.

Source: Nutrition in India: Focus on Trans Fatty Acids, Dr Anoop Mishra, 2007; Trans Fats and Nutritional Significance, Dr B. Sivakumar, 2007

across the world. Denmark and Canada have had legislations limiting trans fats. The US is forcing manufacturers to quantify trans fats on labels. From McDonald's to Kentucky Fried Chicken, companies all over the world are pledging to phase out trans fats from their menu. "The whole thing is a marketing tool," Misra slams. "A food scare like this will only go against our rich culture of street foods and help global biggies get a firmer toehold in the Indian snack market."

Others pooh-pooh the argument. "Today, we know for sure that trans

fats are doubly bad for the heart," points out Dr Anoop Mishra, who heads metabolism at Fortis Hospitals. A quick Google will tell you, it is the "killer fat", the "Franken-fat that will not die", "more deadly than saturated fats", "furring up our bodies like old kettles". Dig deeper and you find trans fats "linked" to disorders ranging from Alzheimer's to autism. Mishra and Sivakumar estimate that in urban India, trans fats are all around us—biscuits contain 9 per cent, vanaspati 30 and milk products 0.12. Between just these three items, the total count of

trans fats comes to 1.26 gm a day. The recommended daily ceiling determined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is just five gm. In a 2006 study, Mishra found the percentage of trans fats in the diet of 188 Delhi children to be as high as 1.16 gm a day.

There, however, seems to be a catch. Some point out that a whole range of risk factors go into the making of chronic lifestyle diseases. The problem with focusing on one such factor, they hold, might create the impression that fixing trans fats alone would ensure exclusive protection.

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### WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU AND WHAT'S NOT



Trans fats dig deep in our food basket, hiding in the most unlikely of foods. Experts guide on what to avoid for a trans-fat free diet.

What matters is not the amount but the type of fat in the diet, say medics. The key is to substitute good fats—mono and poly-unsaturated—for bad fats—saturated and trans. Olive oil, mustard, canola and rice bran are the best that way. Happy cooking!



The labelling rule applies only to food sold in stores. Not to restaurants. It's likely you eat trans fats when you eat out. Restaurants invariably use cheaper cooking medium high on trans fats, recycle oil and deep-fry food. Good life and good health just don't go together.



"Just about 2.6 gm a day of trans fat—half as much is contained in a packet of French fries—raise the risk of heart disease," claim medics. One serving of a pizza, burger or patty within 15 to 30 days is considered "high-risk".



Butter packs a heart attack in every teaspoon, medics used to say at one time. Now, they say margarine is even worse. Peanut butter may have lots of protein, but it's high on trans fats as well. Avoid vanaspati like the plague—it's the richest source of trans fat in the country.



Be careful with the sweet stuff. Bakery products—cakes, cookies, chocolates, ice-creams—are rich in trans fats. Go slow on desi sweets—jalebis and gulab jamuns.



Some trans fats occur in meat and dairy produce. Natural trans fats, however, appear to be less harmful than the man-made variety.



Eat at home for your own good. But diet detectives have decided that even home-cooked food is not safe. Those puris, paranthas, pakoras and samosas are "fairly risky" if taken more than once a week, they say.



Experts say cooking for long in high temperature and recycling the same oil—as some fast-food restaurants reportedly do—can turn the best of oils into trans fats.



### Paranthas, pulao, puris and dosas are high in trans fats.

### Food cooked in olive, mustard and rice bran oils are safer to eat.

But trans fats are not the sole culprits. "There are multiple cogs in the prevention wheel that we need to target," says endocrinologist and AIIMS professor Dr Nikhil Tandon. "Just cutting down on trans fats won't bring down risks."

**A** similar debate is brewing in the West. Researchers from Harvard University estimate that if artificially-produced trans fats were removed from the American diet, up to 2,28,000 heart attacks could be prevented each year. But another study by Tufts University scientists argue it's more complicated. They argue that it is hard to accurately gauge the additional benefits of eliminating trans fats altogether. Simply put, for consumers

eating modest amounts of trans fats, the gain from reduced intake may not be as substantial as might be hoped.

If any problem begged for a market-based solution, this would be it. And the market is responding. Liberty Oil Mills is one of the first in the country to free traditional hydrogenated vegetable oil from harmful trans fats. Frito-Lay, the world's snack kingpin, also deserves a pat. "In India, Frito-Lay has always used only natural vegetable refined oils, which do not have any trans-fatty acids," says Sucheta Govil, the marketing director. "We hadn't mentioned it on the pack as consumer awareness was low. We're planning to migrate to on-pack labelling in a big way." So is Haldiram Products Pvt Ltd, the other market

leader. "Our products are mostly trans-fat free," claims Dr Narendra Shah, who heads R&D. "There's no dearth of consciousness or effort among the food manufacturers," points out Abhirup Seth, executive director with Pepsico who chairs one of the FICCI committees. "But major changes in the food chain can happen only when there is real demand for it. Is the consumer ready?" he wonders.

Grand public health gestures usually follow the science of the moment—and often boomerang. Weren't eggs responsible for heart attacks and vegetable oils for cancer a few years ago? Weren't we asked to avoid ghee and skip the butter for dalda? One can only hope trans fats don't show up in our diet some day in the future. ■