

Oily matters



Check Up Cardiac diseases tend to appear almost a decade earlier in Indians as compared to Westerners , Thinkstock

Recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced a plan urging governments around the globe to eliminate the use of trans fats. This plan, rather a set of guidelines, seeks to eradicate trans fats from global food supplies by 2023, thereby potentially saving some 10 million lives, according to the organisation. We asked experts how important is this for our country and how the rampant use of trans fats is damaging to our health.

Should have been done a long ago

The elimination of trans fats should have been done long back, opines Luke Coutinho, Integrative and Lifestyle Medicine – Holistic Nutrition. “Trans fats are the worst quality fats artificially created by hydrogenation of vegetable oils to make it more solid. It’s widely present in margarine, lard, processed and packaged foods. This rancid thick oil is one of the root causes of inflammation, obesity, high triglycerides, coronary artery diseases and other heart problems and even Alzheimer’s,” says he adding that the only benefit of this oil is a long shelf life and an increased profit for the trans fat producers. Our traditional oils like coconut oil and ghee are pushed aside by the food lobbies by condemning them for causing cardiovascular problems and was being replaced by cheaper fats like trans fats and refined oils to protect their profits. It’s a good thing that the science behind these damaging fats is out because it’s high time we bring back our traditional oils that have been used by our ancestors for decades.

Trans fats are rampant in Indian diet

“The traditional Indian diet usually has deep frying as an important method of cooking food. The use of vanaspati ghee, which is rich in trans fatty acids is rampant due to low cost, longer shelf life. Repeated usage of these oils and ghee by restaurants further increases the trans-saturated fatty acid levels in exponential manner further increasing cardiovascular risk,” says Dr Nilesh Gautam, senior interventional cardiologist, Asian Heart Institute. There’s unavailability of clear guidelines to curb the levels of trans fats. The need of the hour is to seriously contemplate on this issue and to form clear directives for control and sale of food having high trans fat levels.

Indians predisposed to cardiovascular diseases

Indians have a genetic predilection for cardiovascular diseases. Dr Gautam elaborates that cardiac diseases tend to appear almost a decade earlier in Indians as compared to Westerners and a major contribution to the burden of diseases is due to dietary factors. It is difficult to state the exact number.

However, in day-to-day practice, it has been realised that many patients have errant dietary habits and with high saturated fat content, mostly trans fats. Due to trans fats, there has been recent emergence of obesity in adolescent and young age group besides old males and post menopausal females causing a spurt in cardiovascular diseases. Most commonly found heart related problems are categorised as atherosclerotic heart diseases, which includes coronary artery disease leading to angina, acute coronary syndrome and myocardial infarction (commonly known as heart attack).

It’s the need of the hour

How important is this for a country like India, where trans fats and hydrogenated oils are used rampantly by hawkers and majority of restaurants, and many lower-income households? Dr Narayan Gadkar, consultant cardiologist, Zen Multispecialty Hospital, says that both observational studies and clinical trials have found that trans fats significantly increase risk of heart disease. This is very important for our country where incidence of coronary artery diseases is increasing. “We need national policies that virtually eliminate partially hydrogenated vegetable oils in the food supply and replace them with polyunsaturated fatty acids. National bans that virtually eliminate trans fatty acids from the food supply. The effects of mandatory trans fatty acids labelling and voluntary limits. Political awareness, commitment and people’s education are

important for the success of many of the policy interventions aimed at reducing trans fatty acids in the food supply," he says.

TIPS TO AVOID TRANS FATS

Luke Coutinho shares the following guidelines:

The biggest source of trans fats is junk and processed food like bakery items, chocolates, cheese, fried foods, breads, breakfast cereals, frozen foods, commercially available popcorns, etc. A complete cut down on that will result in automatic avoidance of trans fats.

Read labels: When purchasing a product look for key words like partially hydrogenated oil and trans fat, and avoid them.

Don't be misled by the claim of "zero trans fat." Most packaging claim that the product contains zero trans fats and additives but the nutritional information reveals it all.

If one wishes to eat fried foods, make sure it's cooked in fresh oil all the time. Re-heating oils creates a lot of free radicals that are capable of creating a lot of acidity and inflammation in our body.