

Press Release

The fat of our cooking oil: How government regulations are deliberately compromising our health and our bodies

- **Results of CSE laboratory study on cooking oils released. Study looks at major brands in the market. Reveals some unpalatable facts about fat**
- **Finds high levels of dangerous trans fats in all samples of *vanaspati* oils**
- **Sub-committee of health ministry accepts that trans fats unhealthy and wants standards set urgently. But health ministry gives in to industry pressure – no standard is set. Instead, allows companies to label and get away**
- **Study finds oil companies can make claims about health benefits which cannot be substantiated, because we have no real regulator for our health**

New Delhi, February 3, 2009: How 'healthy' is the oil that you are eating? Despite tall claims by companies and manufacturers, the stark truth is that you can never tell. In fact, the oil that you eat believing it to be the best for your health, could probably be swimming with trans fats, which could lead to heart diseases and cancer. Or its claims to health benefits could be plain misinformation – and you would never know, as there is no way of counter-checking these claims.

And all this happens because food regulatory bodies in India just have no stomach for setting stricter standards – for the product or for the health claims on its labels.

This is the finding of a latest laboratory study by the Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). CSE had, earlier, published its findings on pesticides in bottled water, soft drinks and other products.

Trans fats in our oils: what the study found

CSE's Pollution Monitoring Lab tested 30 samples of branded oil widely available in the market. The total fatty acid profile (saturated and unsaturated) comprising 37 components and nine trans fats was analysed. The samples comprised vegetable oils such as soybean, sunflower, mustard and coconut, partially hydrogenated (*vanaspati*) oils, *desi ghee* and butter. They were tested according to the internationally used methodology of the Association of Official Analytical Chemists (AOAC) for fatty acids analysis (Method 969.33 Fatty acids in Oils and Fats).

The tests found that in **all *vanaspati* brands**, trans fat levels were five to 12 times higher than the world's only standard for trans fats in oil, set in Denmark, at 2 per cent of the total oil.

The level ranged from 23.7 per cent in the case of 'Panghat' (a Mawana Sugar brand) and 23.31 per cent in the case of 'Raag' (an Adani Wilmar Ltd brand). Interestingly, the lowest trans fats level was found in *desi ghee* of Milk Foods Ltd and in Amul butter – 3.73 per cent (*see graph*).

It is now well understood in the world of food science that trans fats are found in cooking oil because of the industrial process of hydrogenation, which industry prefers because it can sell oils that have longer shelf life and are easier to use.

But trans fats are deadly for health. They are especially bad for the heart, as they reduce the amount of good cholesterol (HDL). They can increase the risk of infertility in women, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. French researchers have even connected them to breast cancer. It is for this reason that all across the world, trans fats in oil are indicted and are being banned or tightly regulated. After Denmark, most US states have taken the decision to ban or restrict trans fats in food in restaurants.

India's regulatory malady

What is shocking, find CSE researchers, is that even while our food regulators have accepted trans fats as a serious health concern, they are delaying setting the standard, presumably under pressure from the edible oil industry. This is particularly strange, as "today our oil and food industry is in the hands of big multinationals who meet these standards in other parts of the world." As a result, India has no regulation to check the content of trans fats in oil.

In 2004, the Union health ministry's Oils and Fats Sub-committee, under the Central Committee for Food Standards, begun discussions on a standard for trans fats. In January 2008, the sub-committee forwarded its recommendations to the Central committee for standards. But the Central committee is still awaiting more data and information. This procrastination means while there are no legal standards, companies are literally getting away with murder.

Instead of standards, in September 2008, the Union ministry issued a notification for labelling of trans fats on oil and food. So today, oil companies get away by giving the composition in a range: Rath vanaspati, for instance, says its package has 8-33 per cent trans fats. This would mean that the product has 15 times higher trans fats than the Danish standard. This makes a complete mockery of the science of food regulations.

Says Sunita Narain, director, CSE: "If you consider what the Union ministry of health has issued in the name of labelling nutrition facts and you will know how our food is at risk. It literally allows companies to get away with anything – as long as it is on the label. This is just not acceptable."

Other oils: high on hype, low on facts

The other brands tested did not have trans fats but were still very far from the 'perfect healthcare solution' that most of them claimed to be. In fact, the study has found that it is impossible to say with certainty which oil is the best. Manufacturers claim advantages which just cannot be adequately cross-checked and verified.

For instance, while sunflower oil, rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids or PUFA, claims to be excellent for the heart, it is low on omega 3; recent research says that it is omega 3 which prevents ischemic heart diseases. Similarly, canola or rapeseed oil, touted to be "as healthy as olive oil", has been blasted by a large number of studies for being unhealthy for the cardiovascular system and for retarding growth.

The study finds that if all oils are compared against the WHO recommendation, then no single oil in the market can claim to be healthy. For instance, the WHO says that the ratio of PUFA and saturated fatty acids in oil should be between 0.8-1. It also recommends that the ratio of omega 6 and omega 3 should be between 5-10. None of the tested oils, including the much touted healthy brands, meet these standards – says the CSE study.

In this existing climate of misinformation and half-baked information, nutritionists recommend “the best oil is one used in moderation and switched frequently to get the maximum nutrition value.”

Clearly, the matter of food is too serious to be ignored by our regulators, says CSE. We need stringent standards and tough enforcement so that companies cannot take us and our food for a ride. This is a matter of our bodies.

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- *For the complete CSE study, this press release, Down To Earth reportage on cooking oils and related material, please visit www.cseindia.org*