

Elimination of industrially produced trans fatty acids (iTFA) from all foods stressed



Islamabad, November 07, 2023: Industrially produced trans fatty acids (iTFA) are clearly associated with higher disease burden due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardio-vascular diseases, hypertension, strokes, cancers, and diabetes. According to a WHO in 2016, six out of ten deaths in Pakistan contributed due to NCDs, including three out of ten deaths by cardiovascular diseases (CVDs). Similarly, the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) estimated in 2021 that Pakistan has the 3rd highest burden of type 2 diabetes worldwide with more than 33 million cases with additional 10 million termed as pre diabetic. Unhealthy food supply and consumption is among the top contributors to the growing number of overweight people leading to chronic diseases. Focusing on this dietary risk factor to reduce NCDs in Pakistan, these science-based facts were shared by experts during a training workshop for journalists on “Understanding TFAs, Policy, Human Health, and Reporting”, which was organized by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) with the support of Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI) and Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination. Prominent health experts including Mr. Munawar Hussain, Country Coordinator GHAI, Dr. Khawaja Masuood Ahmed, National Coordinator, Nutrition & NFA, Ministry of National Health Services, Islamabad, Dr. Syed Muhammad Ghufraan Saeed, Assistant Professor, Food Science and Technology Department, University of Karachi and Syed Zubair Faisal Abbasi, Project Manager CPDI spoke to the journalists during the training.

More than 28 journalists from across Pakistan representing various national and international media outlets participated in the training. The trainers informed the participants about major dietary risk factors such as high percentage of trans fats, saturated fats, sugar, and sodium in the food supply and dietary practices. For example, Pakistan’s trans fats intake is estimated to be the 2nd highest in the WHO’s EMRO (Eastern Mediterranean) region, as it is about 6% of daily energy intake. Mr. Munawar Hussain, Country Coordinator, Global Health Advocacy Initiative (GHAI) informed the participants that Pakistan’s high industrially produced TFA consumption is linked to Pakistan’s high rate of mortality due to heart disease (29.1% of deaths). “Reducing consumption of TFA has the potential to reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease, particularly in those countries that consume more than 1% of total energy from TFAs.”, he added.

The participants were also informed that the Government of Pakistan has recently taken steps to regulate production and supply of certain types of unhealthy food in some products. For example, the Government has notified that the limit of TFAs cannot be more than 2g per 100g of fat in Vanaspati, shortenings, bakery fats, bakery ware, rusk, and breads. It is a significant step forward, but concern raised by the experts, as all types of food are still not covered in the regulation. It is also yet to be seen if the notified standard will be effectively implemented across Pakistan without any delay. It was stressed that effective regulation and policy measures are needed to regulate all foods with maximum of 2 percent of the iTFA limits.

Dr. Khawaja Masuood Ahmed, shared the brief progress update on reduction of trans fatty acids in Pakistan. He emphasized the importance of adopting the best policy practice for eliminating industrially-produced TFA by setting 2% limit of iTFA of total fats in all foods. "It is the "all foods" regulation which needs urgent attention from the policy circles", he added. "At the present moment, Pakistan's policy environment is complex, and tedious at the same time. Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority (PSQCA) works through a number of committees formed to examine various food items. The current practice is causing delays, and the item-by-item approach has gaps which do not allow a comprehensive regulation on iTFAs contaminating the food supply", he said while stressing on the need of one might regulatory injunction to cover all foods.

Dr. Ghufraan Saeed, shared his struggle and experience of trying to influence iTFA policies in Pakistan, and mentioned that it is both urgent and important to make our food supply safe for consumption by removing the silent killer. He shared findings of numerous research studies, which highlight that the consumption of industrially produced trans-fatty acids (iTFA) significantly contributes to the incidence of NCDs.

In his remarks, Mr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, Executive Director of CPDI emphasized the importance of more media attention to unprecedented health related challenges being faced by the people of Pakistan. He said that all stakeholders including media, government departments and civil society organizations must establish cooperative mechanisms to jointly work for public health, especially through mobilizing public support, adopting appropriate policies and regulations, and effective enforcement of food supply standards. "There is a strong need to bring one single mandatory regulation to set no more than 2% iTFAs limits, as the piecemeal approach does not work", he concluded.

Mr. Afshaar Iqbal from PYCA emphasized on the importance of local languages and social media platform to communicate messages on mobilizing policy support for iTFA regulations. At the closing of the workshop, Ms. Mania Shakeel, a participant journalist from Karachi, said that we clearly understand the seriousness of the iTFAs in the food and believe that journalists can influence attitudes on the one hand and policy on the other. "Therefore, journalists must remain alert about the spread of diseases due to unhealthy diet consumption and help mobilize policy support for adopting best policy practice for iTFA regulations", she added.

About CPDI

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting peace, development, and good governance. With expertise in advocacy and governance, CPDI strives to bring about positive change in Pakistan.

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