

FSSAI Blunders on a Draft Food Policy

Instead of protecting people from poor health outcomes associated with unhealthy food products, the proposed policy might inadvertently even harm Public Health as the consumption of unhealthy food may go up with 'Stars' on the label.

New Delhi: 23 November 22. The FSSAI put up a draft regulation for comments from the public for the Front-of-Pack Labelling of pre-packaged food products. The draft, if not changed substantially, is unlikely to achieve the intended objective and the mandate FSSAI has to ensure food safety of Indian consumers. Robust scientific evidence indicates that pre-packaged food products (which are usually industrial formulations and marketed) are responsible for increasing the salt/sugar or saturated fat content of one's diet. Whether these products are manufactured by MNCs or Local companies, increased consumption of such food products is directly associated with obesity, type-2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, chronic kidney disease, cancers and adverse mental health. More recent evidence points out to negative health impacts on mothers and children too. New [study](#) findings suggest that the prevalence of high BP in Indian adolescents is substantially high (one-in three) and coexists with other cardiovascular disease risk factors. This clearly calls for interventions to reduce the consumption of foods high in sugar, salt, or saturated fats.

Dr. Navdeep Singh Khaira, DM, a renowned Nephrologist of Punjab, working as Senior Consultant in Fortis Hospital Ludhiana, said, "I have been following this issue for more than a year. Based on the RTI information, I am terribly disappointed to see that FSSAI continues to rely on the report of IIM on its face value and goes for 'Stars' on unhealthy food products. Not only has FSSAI biased the IIM researchers towards HSR, it did not even attempt to analyse the IIM report. It implies a predetermined outcome by the FSSAI that brings up Star Rating to all unhealthy food products."

A member of a scientific panel of FSSAI, who wishes to be anonymous, confirmed "IIM study outcomes were shared with us in the stakeholders' meeting and we were asked to go ahead with HSR. We were never given an opportunity to analyse the IIM report"

A former BJP MLA, Mr. Ravinder Bansal said, "I'm diabetic. I just want to know if the food product being displayed or sold is high in sugar or not on its front of the pack. The

“Stars” do not tell me about this fact. I have suggested to the FSSAI to change its current draft. Further he said, “Label must be simple and true to the content of the food product for people to make an informed choice to buy or eat such products; ‘stars’ on unhealthy foods are in fact misleading.”

By sticking to a focal point of high sodium, total sugar and total fats, front of pack labels will not allow industry to play around with the algorithms of unhealthy foods, says Ashim Sanyal, COO, Consumer VOICE. Warning labels will also empower customers to make healthier choices and contribute to the prevention of the most concerning diet-related NCD in India. He added, FSSAI solely relies on the IIM report for the decision taken in favour of HSR on 15-2-22, a report that has been [critiqued](#) by leading experts in its methods and interpretation.

“Chips, colas & chocolates are bad for your health. And their consumers, mostly children, need to know this in plain, simple words. That’s what a health warning on the pack can achieve, protect our kids from being encashed for profit by the food industry”, said Rujuta Diwekar, leading nutrition consultant in India.

Professor Harsh Pal Singh Sachdev, a senior epidemiologist of the country said, “It is surprising that the food risk factors ‘sugar’ has been capped at 21 g per 100 grams in solid foods, which is way higher than the WHO’s guidelines, based on well researched nutrient profiles for food products in several regions including Asia. Unless compelling reasons mandate otherwise, FSSAI should have strictly adhered to the WHO Guidelines to identify food risk factors accordingly. It may then re-think its strategy to inform people about food risk factors more directly, truly and simply.”

The Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi), a national think tank on nutrition policy strongly suggested that the regulation be revised. Dr. Arun Gupta, convener of NAPi expressed, “there is no scientific evidence that adding a positive factor or nutrient like vegetable/ fruit/ nuts etc. to an unhealthy food product would reduce risk of disease. Body metabolism does not function that way. Neither Nuts/fruit/legumes can reduce the absorption of sugar/salt or fat in the unhealthy product nor its negative impact.”

It is ridiculously high to give a window of 4 years to comply with. This conveys a lack of urgency to tackle an epidemic of Non-Communicable Diseases with life long and intergenerational consequences. It seems to be a cakewalk for the food industry on top of giving “Stars” to the same food product, which is responsible for the growing epidemic/pandemic of non-communicable disease not only in India but worldwide. Most countries in the world have rejected Star ratings. Can’t it be done in six months, experts asked?

Dr. Vandana Prasad member of NAPi and a public health professional, pointed out that “Considering that the draft of certain regulations to further amend the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling & Display) Regulations, 2020 is being brought out in the interest of people’s health, it is a fundamental flaw of concept to rate foods from “least healthy to

healthiest” [Chapter 6, 14 (2)(b)] and include the notion of positive nutrients instead of declaring warnings against foods that are clearly accepted as being unhealthy. For instance, a packet of chips or a bottle of sugary soda would also be labelled healthy to some extent. Moreover, the token addition of some positive nutrients like fruits, nuts or fibre could substantially increase their rating without in any way mitigating their adverse effect on health. The vehement response by the food industry against any form of FoPL is testimony to the fact that it depends upon the consumption of unhealthy foods for its massive profits. Does the FSSAI exist to protect their interests or the interests of consumers, is the question that this draft raises. Even the definition of HFSS is contradictory between the main body of the draft that accepts the WHO standard, and Schedule III that raises the threshold of sugar to double the WHO standard. It is sad that the FSSAI has not taken on board the extensive inputs that people in the public health space have been making before this draft was released.”

Most of the health professional organizations/public health experts in their comments have endorsed the requirement of warning labels depicting the true information about unhealthy nutrients on FOPL. (List Attached- Annex–Scan QR Code)

With the G-20 Presidency, India could emerge as a leader to solve this most pressing issue facing humanity, and develop strong policies to showcase to the G20 nations how to protect people's health. ‘Warning label’ and prohibition of marketing of unhealthy food products could be critical to tackle the challenges of global health. Brazil and Israel, Mexico, Chile and many Latin American countries have demonstrated commitment. Having policies to reduce the consumption of such food products will impact the dietary habits of populations and preserve traditional diets.

Ends.

Notes for editors:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>

[MOU with IIM](#)

[https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-04-unhealthy-diets-world-biggest-killer.html#:~:text=\(HealthDay\)%E2%80%94Bad%20diets%20are,million%20deaths%20globally%20in%202017.](https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-04-unhealthy-diets-world-biggest-killer.html#:~:text=(HealthDay)%E2%80%94Bad%20diets%20are,million%20deaths%20globally%20in%202017.)

Contacts:

Dr. Arun Gupta 9899676306, arun.ibfan@gmail.com

Nupur Bidla 9958163610 nupurbidla@gmail.com

Ashim Sanyal 93509 98460 coo@consumer-voice.org

Dr. Vandana Prasad 9891552425 chaukhat@yahoo.com



Scan QR Code to get list of Annex