

Airlines may soon give nutritional facts, other details for in-flight meals

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NEW DELHI: The meal tray you get on flights may soon have complete info on its nutritional aspects like calories, list of contents, a best by time (like the date on packaged food) and providing healthy options could become a must for airlines.

Air travellers' common concern of deteriorating in-flight meal quality in most airlines has led to India's food regulator examining the entire gamut of in-flight catering, including transportation of meals, storage on board and then how the same is served. It is now coming out with guidelines for the entire process of in-flight catering.

FSSAI CEO Pawan Kumar Agarwal called a meeting this Thursday with airlines, flight caterers and airport operators to discuss these issues. "The public, at several fora, has expressed concerns about airline food, its quality and safety. Earlier we called meetings with airlines, airport operators, in-flight caterers separately who would say this is the other's area. So we met everyone together to cover all aspects of safety, hygiene of in-flight food and are going to come out with standard operating procedure (SOPs) for each step involved to ensure what is served to passengers is perfectly safe to consume. The process has begun and the aviation industry has been very welcoming towards this initiative," Agarwal, a 1985 batch IAS officer of West Bengal cadre, said.

While flight kitchens where meals are cooked and packed are run by India's leading hospitality chains, they may be asked to give full details of the meals along with the meals in a manner visible to flyers to ensure they know exactly what they are getting and that the same is perfectly safe.

Low cost carriers sell packaged items like sandwiches and snacks that have labels with the best before date and contents. FSSAI wants full service airlines and budget carriers to do the same for

meal trays — like the unpackaged vegetable-pulao-daal or pasta in main course — they give/sell to passengers.

FSSAI found “many gaps” in its regulatory ecosystem for in-flight catering. Based on World Food Safety Guidelines for airline catering and our own rules and regulations, it will now come out comprehensive guidance document for in-flight catering. This will cover issues like how food is to be packaged and till when it has to be served. Responsibility will be fixed for each step.

“Airlines need to focus on supplying healthier option in menu. While some are already doing so, we are notifying menu labelling for served food in restaurants with chains and fixed menu. Airlines and railways usually fix menu and will come in this category,” Agarwal said.

Caterers and airlines say they do their best to ensure flyers get tasty and safe meals. “Issues within are control are taken care of by us. But there are factors beyond our control like the time taken for catering trucks to enter airport after checks. A holistic view has to be taken of the issue as several processes separate the meal tray being packed by us to it landing on the passenger’s front tray table,” said a in-flight catering official.