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FSSAI mulls 'code red' for unhealthy food

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Nagpur: Soon, packaged food items like chips, soups, biscuits, nankeens, sweets, juices etc will have a 'red warning' printed prominently on the packets in case they have high sugar, salt or fat content.

Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has prepared a draft of Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2019, in which it has suggested that packaged products will have to display a red colour coding on packs to notify that the food contains high levels of sugar, salt or fat.

As the new rule is still at draft stage, the FSSAI has invited suggestions from people. At present, packaged food products have green triangle code for vegetarian food and brown circle for the non-veg food items. People can visit FSSAI website (https://fssai.gov.in/comments/Bestviewwl.aspx?NOTIFICATION_ID=1088) and register their suggestions to make this draft a law by July 31.

While dietitians and doctors are happy with this move, packaged food industry is not finding it scientific and viable.

"This is a big step towards ensuring food safety. Consumers will understand better about the composition of food products and they can choose their packaged food accordingly. People are health conscious these days, and they will ignore a pack with red warnings," said Sudhir Deshpande, who retired from FDA as food safety inspector.

Dietitian Meghna Kumre said the display should be prominent enough to attract attention. "At present, manufacturing date, expiry date, and some nutritional values are displayed over the packs but it becomes difficult for consumer to see these at a glance. I hope, the new system should come into force and it will be prominently displayed," she said.

Paediatrician Dr Preeti Deo told TOI that parents are very aware these days and they will make good use of the coding. "Many children are addicted to wafers, corn puffs, finger

snacks which are full of unhealthy ingredients. With red warning printed on the packs, parents will get clear idea of the unhealthiness of these products. I hope, they will avoid packs with more number of red blocks," she said. However, manufactures of packaged food are not happy with the proposed rule. "If we follow the values mentioned in the draft, more than 70% of packaged food available in the market today will be coded red," said a senior official of a Nagpur-based food processing company who was not willing to be named.

"We decide the salt, sugar and fat content of packaged food as per public taste. It's more about taste and not health requirements. Even food items like flavoured milk, lassi, and fruit juices will get red warning as levels of fat in milk and sugar in fruit juices are mostly higher than proposed levels for taste enhancements," he said.

Proposed rule

According to proposed rule, food pack should show name of food (which we see prominently), declaration regarding veg or non-veg (colour coding already exists for this) and per serve contribution of energy, saturated fat, trans fat, added sugar and sodium

For this, a new format has been issued which has 2 parts

Part 1 has declaration of amount of energy, saturated fat, trans fat, added sugar and sodium per serve in five separate blocks

Part 2 has declaration percentage (%) contribution of these ingredients in the pack

The blocks of ingredients for food will be red if:

Value of energy (kcal) from added sugar is more than 10% of the total energy (kcal) provided by 100g or 100ml of the product

Value of energy (kcal) from trans fat is more than 1% of the total energy (kcal) provided by 100g or 100ml of the product

Saturated fat or sodium content provided by 100g or 100ml of the product is more than the threshold values as specified by FSSAI.