

Business Standard

A movement to make India eat safer, healthier food (Column: Active Voice)

IANNS Last Updated at August 7, 2018 12:10 IST

[India](#) bears a terrible burden of [non-communicable diseases](#) (NCDs), with the lack of proper diet and safe [food](#) a [major](#) contributing factor. The country has seen an increase in the NCDs burden from 30 per cent in 1990 to 55 per cent in 2016.

The [World Cancer Research Fund](#) contends that 27 to 39 per cent of the [main cancers](#) can be prevented by improving diet, physical activity and body composition. The Global Status Report on NCDs-2010, has stated that salt consumption has direct implications for [high blood pressure](#) as well cardiovascular issues -- and that saturated and trans-fat consumption increases the risk of [diabetes](#) as well as [coronary heart disease](#).

What one eats, and how one eats, is definitely a significant reason why NCDs have become one of the [major](#) issues in India, as well as across the globe. The way we eat cannot be directly regulated, but there are three [major](#) factors that can be controlled: What we eat, what we know about what we eat and awareness about what we should eat (quantity/choice).

The first aspect comes from the standardisation of food, the idea of safety of the [food](#) that is available for human consumption. In this context, The [Food Safety and Standards Act 2006](#) has enabled amalgamation of all the laws and regulations, and has further led to the creation of the [Food Safety and Standards Authority of India](#) (FSSAI).

The second task comes from the aspect of sharing the information about what we eat. How do I know what I am eating is right? For this, FSSAI has enabled labelling, especially the content and nutritional information.

The third and final task is the mammoth one of telling citizens what they should eat, the choice of food or its quantum. For this, a phenomenal wave of change has just taken flight -- the "Eat Right Movement" -- the main focus of which is to guide citizens across the nation. The movement is built on two broad pillars of "Eat Healthy" and "Eat Safe", which is engaging citizens to improve their [health](#) and well-being. It started off recently with the goal to reduce consumption of high fat sugar and salt (HFSS) foods, and to eat safe and [nutritious food](#).

Any technique adopted to alter the way citizens think, behave and function in society has a long gestation period before a positive outcome can be expected. It should be understood that the premise for adopting a technique for social and behavioural change comes from the fact that it cannot be a discontinuous function, it cannot be a jump from A to B; instead, it has to be a transition with constant nudging.

The reason why the "Eat Right Movement" could be a huge success is that it taps that narrow space of potential between what consumers will ignore because it is unattainable, and what they won't consider important to begin with. Had the movement supported a dramatic reduction in HFSS foods, most consumers would not pay heed to it; but if the movement had just been a simplistic awareness programme, consumers would not consider it important enough to participate in the process. The "Eat Right Movement" not only nudges consumers to take the right step, but also involves them in the process of building a healthier [India](#).

The second important aspect of the movement is that it involves collaboration, as well as voluntarily commitment from the major Food Business Operators, (FBOs) wherein it is not only the final consumer who is part of the movement, but the stakeholders such as FBOs who have the capacity to influence the way food is produced and made available to the people. The movement seeks improved behaviour in terms of [food choices](#) from the supply side as well as the demand side, thereby setting an example can be replicated for other issues within India, and by other nations as well.

The movement incorporates an "Eat Right Toolkit" which is a supportive engagement to be streamlined into the national nutrition and public [health](#) programmes. It also encompasses the Safe and [Nutritious food](#) (SNF) Initiative, which thrives on the philosophy of creating IEC (Information Education Communication) Material, to spread awareness and to be mindful of the concept of "safe and nutritious food".

Clearly, there are quite effective methods in place to alter the way India eats; however, there is a need to throw caution to the wind. The issue is the inability to quantify the changes in habits of citizens in a short span. Therefore, a deflection from strategy should not be based on short-term outcomes. Instead, FSSAI needs to go all guns ablaze in these social and behavioural changes that they have given life to. Because [health](#) and competitiveness will follow if India begins to "Eat Right"!

([Amit Kapoor](#) is chair, Institute for Competitiveness, India. The views expressed are personal. He can be contacted at amit@amitkapoor.com <mailto:amit@amitkapoor.com> and tweets @kautiliya. Paramjeet Chawla, senior researcher, [Institute for Competitiveness](#) has contributed to the article)

--IANS