

Food Safety Authority Promotes Healthy Eating Habits And Food Sustainability Through A District Level Competition

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has started 'Eat Right Challenge' a competition for districts and cities across the country with an aim to encourage people to make more nutritious choices in food consumption and district/city authorities to promote local food and reduce the use of chemicals in food production

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Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's Eat Right Challenge aims to combat poor nutrition intake and spread awareness among consumers to make better food choices

HIGHLIGHTS

- 197 cities, districts to participate in the Eat Right Challenge of FSSAI
- Key themes of Eat Right Challenge- Eat Safe, Eat Healthy, Eat Sustainable
- FSSAI to give Rs. 5 lakh to each district for gearing up for the challenge

New Delhi: Did you know, a packet of chips has high salt and fat and is harmful because it can not only harm your digestive system and cause weight gain but can also harm your brain, say experts. Did you know, fruits are packed with micronutrients like antioxidants and fibres and can help in strengthening the digestive system and build immunity? So when it comes to health, it is a contest between chips, noodles, burgers, samosas versus vegetables, legumes, fruits, grains, nuts and herbs. It is a choice that every consumer needs to make but for them to eat right, they need to know what is good for them and what is not. That is what

the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) intends to do as it initiates Eat Right Challenge, a competition for district and cities in the country.

Eat Right Challenge includes scaling up various activities of 'Eat Right India' movement, a flagship programme of FSSAI under the aegis of the Union Health Ministry in the districts and cities. These activities majorly include strengthening food safety, spreading awareness among consumers about micronutrients like vitamins and minerals essential for energy production, immunity and other vital functions of the body, to help them make more nutritious food choices, to ensure that food businesses provide healthy foods and encourage districts and cities to grow more food locally without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

While talking to NDTV about the competition in which 197 districts and cities across the country have registered to participate, Arun Singhal, CEO, FSSAI said,

Eat Right India is our flagship campaign in which we look at all aspects of food security value chain from eating safe to eating healthy food and finally the sustainability of food. So the entire food ecosystem is covered by this programme. Through this competition, we are targeting the whole population of the country to encourage them to make healthier choices. We have invited districts and cities to participate in this competition, and I am very happy that in the very first year we launched this challenge, 197 cities and districts have joined the challenge. It is a good number, considering the [COVID-19](#) pandemic and the unprecedented situation the districts are facing currently.

Mr. Singhal further said that each district will be provided with the financial assistance of Rs. 5 lakh to kick start the activities for the challenge. He said,

The money can be used for any activity the district or the city wants to plan as part of the challenge like surveillance of the samples of milk or oil or other foods, awareness generation among people on nutrition, training of people in food hygiene and food safety. In short, on anything that strengthens the food safety ecosystem in the district/city.

What Comprises Eat Right Challenge?

According to FSSAI, the Municipal Authorities and District Magistrates are expected to lead the Eat Right Challenge in their respective cities and districts. Ruchika Sharma, media coordinator of FSSAI highlighted that the activities under the competition are to promote the Eat Right India campaign that is based on three key themes:

Eat Safe: Ensuring personal and surrounding hygiene, hygienic and sanitary practices through the food supply chain, combating adulteration, reducing toxins and contaminants in food and controlling food hazards in processing and manufacturing processes.

Eat Healthy: Promoting diet diversity and balanced diets, eliminating toxic trans-fats or the 'bad fat' found in industrial food products that has significant negative health effects, reducing consumption of salt, sugar and saturated fats that are another form of 'bad fat'

which may increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. and promoting large-scale [fortification](#) or food enrichment with additional nutrients. Thus increasing the intake of fortified staples like rice, milk, salt among others to address micronutrient deficiencies and getting fortified food incorporated in vital nutrition schemes like [Mid-Day Meal scheme](#), ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) scheme, Public Distribution System (PDS).

Eat Sustainable: Promote local and seasonal food production, prevent food loss and food waste by avoiding transporting food through long distances and growing local, conserve water, reduce the use of chemicals in food production and use of safe and sustainable packaging.

Apart from this, the authorities are required to conduct capacity building programmes for those handling the food, awareness building programmes among citizens on changing food choices, creating more Eat Right Schools, Campuses, food hubs and railway stations. Mr. Singhal said,

For exercising healthy choices, we have come out with regulation for schools which says that high fat, sugar and salt-containing food will not be served in schools and cannot even be advertised in the schools. So when we talk about Eat Right Campuses and Eat Right Schools, all these elements come in like junk food cannot be served on the campus, there should hygiene rating of all the food establishments on the campus, these should be a training of all the workers in hygienic practices, there should be awareness building about healthy food in the entire campus, so all these components go into certifying Eat Right Schools and Eat Right Campuses. We also certify railway station as Eat Right Railway Stations.

He further said that children and women are very important stakeholders in the entire food ecosystem and thus increasing their participation in ensuring healthier food choices of the family and making them aware about micronutrient essential to fight malnutrition and over-nutrition is also a component of the competition.

Hygiene is another component of the competition. Mr. Singhal asserted,

It is our mandate to ensure that the samples of food and supplementary nutrition provided at ICDS Centres/ Anganwadis are analysed for hygiene and safety before they reach the children and pregnant women.

Another component on which the participants will be judged in this competition is implementing Eat Right initiatives such as RUCO- Repurpose Used Cooking Oil to produce biodiesel. Thus, eliminating health hazards caused by the multiple use of cooking oils by food outlets and local 'halvais' (Confectioner).

The challenge which was launched on August 19 will continue till March 31 after which the performance of each participating district and city will be evaluated on the basis of the improvement gained in implementing the three key themes of Eat Right India campaign in

comparison to the baseline data, being documented currently. The top performing district/city would be recognized and felicitated by FSSAI on June 7, 2021, World Food Safety Day.

Mr. Singhal said that those districts that have not registered for competition now but undertake similar activities like the participating district and if they document and send to FSSAI, they may also get facilitated with consolation prizes on the day of result.

Eat Right Challenge And The Pandemic

In the light of the pandemic and the unprecedented situation caused by it, building immunity through food can prove to be very helpful, says Dr. Jagmeet Madan, National President Of Indian Dietetic Association (IDA). Under the Eat Right Challenge, the districts and cities have to compete with each other to encourage people to make better food choices and also take care of food safety for them. Ganesh Kandwal Designated Officer for Eat Right Challenge, Dehradun said,

The timing of this competition could not be more apt. Citizens will also understand its relevance and participate more because the pandemic has reminded the importance of having a stronger internal immunity.

Mr. Singhal asserted that because of the pandemic, there had been some disruption in the food supply chain, especially in the rural area which also affected important programmes like mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition programmes under ICDS. He added that the states governments have worked towards resuming all nutrition-related activities and these schemes are back on track. In villages arrangement have been made to keep providing supplementary nutrition at home. He said,

Our programme doesn't involve providing any supplementary nutrition, but what we are concerned with is making people aware about what is required. They need to be made aware about micronutrients essential for the body, they should be aware of how to move away from carbohydrates and poor cholesterol found in junk and processed foods and move toward fruits and vegetables and such foods that are more nutritious.

One Of The Major Outcomes Of The Competition- Food And Nutritional Self-Reliance Of Districts, Says FSSAI

According to FSSAI, promoting self-reliance in terms of food and nutrition in the districts is an essential component of the competition. Mr. Singhal asserted that under 'Eat Sustainable' component, FSSAI is promoting local food because those are more nutritious and also environment friendly. He said,

Sustainable food component also focuses on encouraging the districts to become self-reliant in food production. Nutritious vegetables and fruits can be grown locally. They are perishables, so if these are transported over long distance, these will lose their nutrition and

some amount of wastage will also take place. So if you consume locally grown fruits and vegetables, then your nutrition goes up and wastage goes down. If you consider millets, for example. Millets have more micronutrients than wheat and rice have. So eating local is a good idea. When we had a food security issue and we went to such variety of rice and wheat that have high productivity, along with that came chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides which started being used extensively and they do tend to have poor effect on the health as there is always some level of these chemicals in the food. So organic farming is one of the pillars of sustainability.

He further added that growing local food also allows for optimum use of water resources. He said that local varieties of vegetables and grains are in tune with the local eco-system of that area. Therefore, if there is water scarcity, then the locally grown variety of food would be such that doesn't consume much water, on the other hand, when there is a lot of water available, then there might be some other variety. Mr. Singhal further added,

If we rely on locally produced food, we are actually helping the environment. Because, if we bring in food from a distant area like transporting food from Punjab to Madhya Pradesh, the long-distance of transportation involves the consumption of diesel or petrol and thus carbon footprints increase. So, using long-distance food items, not items are grown locally, is potentially harming the environment.

How Are District Preparing To Win The Eat Right Challenge?

While talking about how the district of Dehradun is preparing to win the competition, Mr. Khandwal said that the district authorities have already started focusing on two components- building awareness among people about healthy food and collecting used oil from over 20 food outlets and sending it to Indian Institute of Petroleum (IIP) for repurposing it as biofuel. He added,

We will soon start other activities on par with like sample testing for milk, surveillance of food items provided by businesses to ensure that people get safe food and healthier food choices that are not high in fats, salt and sugar.

Dr. H G Koshia, Commissioner of Food Safety, Gujarat acknowledged that THE competition between districts that is based on improving the eating habits of the citizens will ultimately empower them with better health and well-being. He said,

With 18 districts and 5 cities, Gujarat has joined the race towards making the Eat Right India more effective for the public interest. Active participation of Gujarat will surely help strengthen Gujarat's food Ecosystem. Gujarat has already created six Eat Right Campuses, 20 religious places with BHOG which is Blissful Hygienic Offering to God certification and nine Clean Street food hubs. Under the Eat Right Challenge, we hope to build many more places providing healthy food choices to people.