

Junk food must carry warning labels

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E-Paper

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's (FSSAI) recently published a draft of the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2019, for public comments. This draft has been strongly opposed by the food industry. The All India Food Processors' Association has termed it as 'not scientific or practical enough to be implemented'. The National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories has termed the regulations as 'a wrong move at a wrong time'. Its managing director, Prakash Naiknavare, is reported to have said, 'One cannot club sugar in the same class as alcohol, cigarettes and white cocaine.'

So what is the reason why this draft regulation is attracting the ire of the industry? And is the industry's displeasure reasonable? First, let's understand the draft Labelling and Display Regulations and then its rationale. The draft proposes to mandatorily declare amount of calories, salt, added sugar, saturated fats, trans fats and cholesterol on the package of food. The draft further proposes that companies must also disclose information on the serving size and the per serve percentage contribution of a particular ingredient (like salt or trans fats) to the recommended dietary allowance (RDA). 'Serving size' is the maximum quantity of food that a person should consume from a package of food. For example, the serving size declared on the package of the Lay's Chips in the US and Europe is 28 grams or 15 chips. That is, according to PepsiCo, the makers of Lay's Chips, one should not consume more than 15 potato chips in one sitting. The RDA is the recommended daily intake of calories, salt, sugar and fats for a normal person; consuming more than this in a day is considered unhealthy. The idea of putting serving size and the per serve percentage contribution to RDA is to inform the consumers about the 'unhealthiness' of packaged and processed food.



Under the current Packaging and Labelling Regulations, enacted in 2011, most of the above is not mandatory. Companies are not required to declare the amount of salt, added sugar, trans fats, cholesterol, etc on the label. Serving size and per serve nutrient declaration is not mandatory. However, if a company claims that its product is 'healthy', it has to declare the amount of nutrients, serving size, per serve nutrient etc. So, our current food labelling rules are based on the principle that if a product is bad don't tell the customer, but if it is good then advertise. But, this principle is not commonly used by the food regulators of other countries. In countries such as the US, Canada, Israel, Singapore and Brazil, most of the information is mandatorily required to be declared. Multinational corporations operating in India are already declaring this information in other countries. But, most of the information is declared on the back-of-the-package (BoP). What the draft regulation is proposing is the front-of-the-package (FoP) labelling and a warning label for food item with very high salt, sugar or fats content. This is riling the industry.

The draft rules are essentially proposing that apart from BoP information disclosure, some of the most important information should also be put on FoP. In addition, it is proposing that a 'red-coloured' warning symbol should also be put on FoP if saturated fats, trans fats, added sugar and salt exceed a certain threshold level individually. The more the number of the red warning symbols, the healthier the food is.

The industry feels that the warning label would unfairly club junk food in the same category as alcohol and tobacco. The question is: Is it unfair to consider junk food as similarly unhealthy as alcohol and tobacco? Let's look at the data. In 2016, the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems, an independent international group of leaders and stakeholders set up to help governments in low-and middle-income countries develop evidence-based food policies, found that six of the top 11 risk factors driving the global burden of disease were related to diet. Their most startling finding was that the risk of death and disease due to poor diets was far higher than those posed by alcohol, tobacco, drugs and unsafe sex combined. They found that obesity, which is largely due to poor diet, is as risky as smoking or alcoholism. They defined a poor diet as one containing insufficient calories, vitamins and minerals, or too many calories, saturated fats, salt or sugar. The data from India is equally worrying. For example, overweight/obesity levels among the 15-49-year-old population have doubled in a decade. In urban areas, about one-third of the population is overweight/obese. Obesity is the primary trigger for hypertension and type-2 diabetes. Likewise, about two-thirds of Indians now die because of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes. Many NCDs are associated with an unhealthy diet. So, there is now enough evidence to support the fact that bad food is as bad as alcohol and tobacco. And, like alcohol and tobacco, people must be made aware of the dangers of poor diets and junk foods. The FoP and the red-coloured warning symbol are the best ways to inform consumers and enable them to make informed choices. The warning labels will overcome the huge literacy and language barriers in the country. It is not easy for even the most educated to interpret the labels. A symbol, however, is easily interpretable and easy to understand. The most important aspect of the warning symbol is that it incentivises companies to reformulate their products and make them healthier. So, a company can make its food healthy and eliminate the need to label. It is clear that if no action is taken on the bad food, the burden of NCDs will overwhelm our health infrastructure and economy. Some estimates suggest that about 50% of India can become obese by 2030. India is already the diabetes capital of the world and hypertension is a household phenomenon in the country. One shudders to think of the consequences when half the country is obese. It is, therefore, time for concerted action.

The draft regulation is a move in the right direction. It is in the interest of consumers and the nation that the dangers of junk food are disclosed and widely disseminated. It is in the interest of the food industry as well. If they can successfully market bad food, surely they can more successfully market good food. As responsible businesses, the food industry should, therefore, support this law.