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Advice ignored repeatedly, plan afoot to ban junk food at schools

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New Delhi: Soon, junk food will go completely off the menu at school canteens with Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) proposing to ban food items like burgers, pizzas, chowmein and french fries from December. Several guidelines have been made in the past to check the consumption of food items, which are of little or no nutritional value, by children. But they continue to be available at school cafeterias. With the proposed ban coming into effect from December, one can expect a “healthy change” at city’s schools.

Some of the schools have already started preparing fresh menus and instructions for parents. “We tried to impose ban on such food items several times, but children and parents keep on coming with requests. If the ban is enforced, it will be easier for us to convince them,” said the principal of a popular school in south Delhi.

“The ban is okay, but the implementation has to begin at home. In our school, sale of such items is not allowed, but during an inspection we found that parents had packed pasta and Maggi for lunch. We have warned them about the ill-effects of such foods, and a fresh guideline will be to issued to them soon,” said another school principal.

Some schools have already taken steps to keep unhealthy options off the menu. Tania Joshi, principal of The Indian School, said, “In our canteen, we do not allow maida momos. They are replaced with wheat momos. White bread is not allowed in our school. We also have designated dates for different food items, and that helps.”

At the state level, members of the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) have been conducting inspection of the schools to check sale of foods and drinks ‘high in fat, sugar and salt’ (HFSS) content.

“Recently, we had received a series of complaints, and inspections revealed that many

schools were providing foods and drinks high on fat, salt and sugar content. Notices were sent to 10 schools earlier this week, and they have been asked to reply by November 20," said DCPCR member Ranjana Prasad.

In December last year, another 10 reputed private schools were served notices in connection with the sale of junk food.

TOI team's visit to a few city schools revealed that most of the students' favourite food items were part of the HFSS list. They were easily available in the school canteens and the shops located nearby.

The rule, however, bans sale of junk food within 50 metres from the schools.

"Our school does not have a canteen, so I don't have to worry much. When the children leave school, the teachers are posted outside till they get into their buses," said Jyoti Arora, principal, Mount Abu Public School, Rohini. "We are hosting a national-level chess championship, and HFSS food is banned at the venue," she added.