

We are trying to bring in scientific foundation for health claims: Rita Teotia, Chairperson, FSSAI

The area of food labeling in the front of the pack is an effort to bring the attention of the consumer on the total calories count, the level of salt, sugar and saturated fat in particular pack as the percentage of the recommended daily allowance.

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Shahid Akhter, editor, ETHealthworld spoke to **Rita Teotia**, Chairperson, [FSSAI](#), to know more about the objectives and programs of FSSAI and how they are trying to bring regulations on food labeling.

FSSAI: Key milestones of 2019 and plans for 2020

The biggest effort that we have made is to build partnerships with multiple stakeholders. The food sector affects around 1.35 billion Indian citizens and with that, it's just an enormous task that cannot be done by the regulator themselves. It is got to be through participation and shared responsibility with all the stakeholders. During this year, we set up a network of professionals, what we call the NetProFan. This includes six national associations such as the Indian Medical Association, Nutrition Society of India, Chef's Association, basically all the stakeholders in the system.

This network now has state-level chapters and these chapters focus on spreading the message of eating right to all their stakeholders. This is one level, second is our partnership for capacity building. Our food businesses also need support in order to be compliant. The regulations are in place, so our FOSTAC is a training program design to support industries to be compliant in sector to sector.

We now have 216 FOSTAC training, all private sectors that now are spread throughout the country and provide support to food businesses. The third thing is consumers organisation, we call this a network of Consumer Organisation in Food and Nutrition. These organisations, also interested in the area of food and health, have come together to work with the [Food Safety Authority](#), then comes the focus on few areas such as awareness, strengthening the small and petty businesses, helping them to engage in various activities that we are promoting.

Also, some of the voluntary organisations with the capacity will support us in our surveillance work in order to ensure that the food is safe and healthy. Finally, we are setting up a network with research organisations who will throughout the country in six key areas of our interest including testing the food additives, adulterants, etc, they would do the horizons scanning and will support us with the basic direction for future standard-setting and research work.

Eat Right India/ Poshan Abhiyan: Views, efforts, and initiatives

Eat Right India campaign is an overarching campaign that the Food Safety Authority has gone into. This covers three pillars. The first pillar is Eat Right, it means a healthy diet, safe food, and safe cooking practices. Eat Healthy looks at the broadbase of the diet, eating fortified foods and eating a diet that is low in fat, sugar, and salt. The third pillar is eating sustainably and that focuses on local and seasonal fruits, water conservation and less plastic use. Now, these are the three core pillars of the Eat Right. They are backed up by a substantial campaign.

The first was Swasth Bharat Yatra which we took out in late 2018 and this mobilised cyclists. About 21,000 cyclists held events in 2,100 locations and touched about 2.5 crore consumers with the message of eating right and healthy. This was one way to mobilise people around the idea of healthy diets. We also back this by consumer-facing campaigns. We have done a film called 'Thoda Kam' and done a heart attack rewind which focuses on the reduction of fat in the diet. There are outreach tools that we use to make consumers much more aware.

On the supply side, we work with the [industry](#) and now have probably a large number of bakery associations, biscuit manufacturing associations who have committed to reducing the trans fat in their finished products. We have about 15 major food processing companies such as Patanjali, HUL, ITC, etc who have committed to redesigning their processed food products to contain much less salt, sugar, and fat. We have got food chains that are offering healthier options on their menus and are also adopting menu labeling. These are voluntary initiatives that have been undertaken.

Obesity in India: FSSAI's awareness initiatives

The entire effort of the Eat Right campaign is on the demand side consumer-facing. The effort is to reach the consumer through various campaigns, outreach efforts, all backed with films, national competitions for children and initiatives through our various networks in order to raise awareness about food safety and eating right and also on the supply side to make sure that healthier choices are available on-demand to those consumers who seek them out.

FSSAI: Food fortification strategy

It's a fact that, Indians do suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. Around 70 percent of Indians suffer from it. We advocated approaches such as dietary diversification, food supplementation, bio-fortification, and fortification. As far as the fortification is concerned we have had discussions over the years, and finally, in 2018 we came out with regulation, setting the standards for fortification of five staples. These five staples were identified because they are common to the diets nationally. These include edible cooking oil, milk which we have advocated fortification with vitamin A and D, rice, wheat, and wheat flour fortified with iron, folic acid, and vitamin B complex and salt double fortified with iodine and iron. These are the five staples, but we have set the levels between 30-50% of the recommended daily allowance.

We are also working with national programmes of the ICDS, the mid-meal program, and the Public Distribution System to ensure these keep national programs that reach the most vulnerable Indians adopt fortified staples as part of the program. For this, we are working with state governments with about 19 of them are on board. They are doing it statewide or they are doing it in some districts. On the voluntary side also, about 116 products are now available on the market shelves which is really encouraging because we have not yet mandated fortification. The packaged edible oil about 47 percent is now fortified and the milk about 37 percent are voluntarily fortified as per our standards. All the food products on the supermarket shelves which are fortified are required to bear the plus F logo on the front of the pack.

FSSAI: Message for manufactures

We have just one message and that is, we need your support. All the stakeholders are working with us through our various partnerships program. We urge the food businesses to interact with us on areas of concern. We have been very receptive and supportive, but fundamentally our concern is consumer well-being and health.

FSSAI: Food label regulations

As far as nutrition labeling is concerned, our labeling regulations are roughly similar to those that are as per global practice. What we are doing now is that we have brought out a draft

regulation on health claims. When can a food product make a health claim that a particular food achieves a certain objective or just by name imply that it has health benefits which it may or may not have? Having a scientific foundation for health claims is something that we are mandating. The other area of food labeling on which we are working is the front of pack labeling. Throughout the world, it has been observed the nutritional labeling at the back of the pack, consumers do not understand it very well. The front of the pack is an effort to bring the attention of the consumer on the total calories count, the level of salt, sugar and saturated fat in particular pack as the percentage of the recommended daily allowance.