

State FDA to make health check-ups mandatory for food delivery personnel

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E-Paper

In a first in India, authority will order online food aggregators next month to keep records of delivery professionals' health. Move is to ensure that any infectious diseases are not passed on due to incorrect handling ordering food to one's doorstep has become an indispensable part of urban life for many, thanks to the burgeoning industry of online food delivery companies like Swiggy, Zomato, UberEats, Foodpanda, etc.

over the last few years. So much so that even after numerous negative cases caught public attention over recent months — demonstrating not just a blatant disregard for basic food hygiene and safety, but also a lack of regulation — the popularity of such services remains largely undisturbed. However, after watching a slew of violations from the sidelines, the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has now decided to step in. The authority has declared its intent to keep a check on the health of food delivery partners, in a bid to ensure that food handled and received through them remains hygienic and uncontaminated. For this, the FDA has instructed the aggregators that soon, routine health check-ups of their delivery partners will be made mandatory. While lakhs of men and women across the country work to deliver for online food aggregators today, the new move will make Maharashtra the first state to introduce such a rule. In the last three months, several cases have caught the eye of social media, wherein violations of food safety have occurred during delivery. Last December, Zomato became mired in controversy after a two minute video from Madurai went viral, in which one of its deliverymen in uniform was captured sneaking food out of the bag, skimming off bites from packages, resealing them and then heading off to hand them over to customers. In February this year, a Chennai resident found a bloodstained adhesive bandage in a box of noodles ordered via delivery giant Swiggy, after he had consumed half his meal.

While these shockers propelled the state FDA to take strict steps, the Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006 and Rules and Regulations of 2011 already mandate all food business operators to regularly conduct health check-ups of staff handling food. This has to be routinely accomplished with a registered medical practitioner, who must then issue a certificate as to whether an employee is healthy for the job. This record can be asked for by the FDA at any time. “We want all online food delivery aggregators to mandatorily facilitate health check-ups of delivery partners and maintain meticulous records of this. As their job entails handling food and beverages, there is always the chance of diseases being transmitted,” explained state FDA commissioner Pallavi Darade. Officials fear that people directly handling food could in particular contribute to the spread of diarrhoeal diseases and viral gastroenteritis, besides some other bacterial and viral infections. Eager to implement the new initiative, FDA has announced that it will issue orders about these mandatory health checkups next month, and will also ask the companies to submit these details rapidly. Darade added, “Existing food safety rules clearly state that these aggregators are obliged to routinely conduct health checks of food handlers. The online business is streamlined — they are not like street hawkers, who are in a largely uninvigilated industry. There is a risk that food handlers with an infectious disease could transmit it on to a customer via edibles. We will continue to keep tabs on online food delivery platforms, and will instruct them to submit updated medical details of delivery partners soon.”

FDA assistant commissioner for Pune region, Sampat Deshmukh, further elaborated, “It does not stop at health check-ups. Food handlers must also maintain self hygiene. They must keep their hair short and cut their nails, not consume gutkha or smoke. As per the norms, every food handler must undergo a health check-up at least once a year, and be free from skin infections and contagious diseases.” While UberEats and Foodpanda refused to comment on the development when contacted by Mirror, a company spokesperson for Zomato shared, “We take the health and safety of our delivery partners very seriously and have introduced various programmes targeted at propelling their holistic growth, like collaborating with traffic police for road safety training and focusing on skilling and re-skilling them with Zomato Rider University. We also offer life and health insurance benefits above the market standards and will also soon start organising regular health camps for all our delivery partners.” Meanwhile, a Swiggy spokesperson said, “As an industry leader and category creator, Swiggy is committed to bringing in the necessary confidence and control in the safe handling of food. To continue providing a delightful consumer experience, Swiggy is already in the process of procurement of medical fitness certificates and transporter registration under the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) for our delivery partners across India. As an intermediary providing the service of delivering food from partner restaurants, Swiggy is committed to working with the authorities to ensure safe handling of food during last-mile delivery. Delivery partners engage with Swiggy on a principal-to-principal basis and undergo all necessary background verification and training on various topics from time to time.”