

Down To Earth

FSSAI commits to stricter labelling norms, but without a timeline

Experts stress on proper warning, regulations on advertisements

[Meenakshi Sushma](#)

Sunday 17 March 2019



Do labels on packaged food help consumers make informed choices? Or do they help manufacturers trick gullible buyers? The National Food Conclave discussed this on March 15, 2019.

Packaged food entered kitchens by convincing women that cooking could be much faster and easier, according to Rekha Harish, vice-president, north zone of Indian Academy of Paediatrics. “We have shifted from homes to the market, which has led to an enormous development of the food business,” she said, adding that their growth was proportional to the rise of obesity in children.

How do children get to know about such food? Through television, internet channels (like YouTube) and banners placed at places where children would gather.

Both the invisible twist on food labels and the luring of children through advertisement need stricter regulation, Harish said.

Misleading labels

A soup brand claims it is healthy, because it is low of fat. What it does not say is how high it is on sodium.

Similarly, 'health drinks' brands claim that pediatricians recommend them for development of children. "What really happens is that children become hyper-active after drinking them as they are high on sugar. Once the effect wears off, they become a bit dull... This cyclical reaction gives the mothers an illusion that the product is effective," Harish said. Pediatricians sadly prescribe pre-mix drinks like Pediasure, which claims to enhance growth in children. Such beverages are not required if children consume a balanced diet, she added.

Industry at advantage

Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) food safety and toxins team in 2016 released a report on "[food labelling](#), claims and advertisements". In April 2018, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India released a draft notification on labeling regulations, which was criticised by some quarters.

Labelling of High fat/sugar/salt (HFSS) content needs to be mandatory as opposed to the current practice of labelling only when a claim is made. For fat, clear labels detailing trans fat, mono unsaturated fatty acid (MUFA) and poly unsaturated fatty acid (PUFA) are required.

Such information should be given irrespective of claims, Amit Khurana, programme director, food safety and toxins, CSE, said. "CSE made a few recommendations, including standardisation of per-serving size, mandatory labelling of salt/sodium, added sugar, fats and trans fat, and products with genetically modified organisms. Front-of-the-pack (FOP) labelling should be developed, including HFSS warning," he said.

When will the FSSAI fill the gaps? Kumar Anil, advisor to the authority said, the draft regulation will be implemented soon, but couldn't provide a timeline as several officials need to go through the documents.

"But the base work is done. We are trying to include warning symbols for HFSS food and also will bring the FOP labelling system," Anil said.