

Recently, Nikita Suresh breakfasted on whole wheat sourdough slices topped with cherry tomatoes, a peri peri hummus spread and a sprinkling of broccoli microgreens. Such delicious but also, decidedly healthy meals are all part of the (diet) plan for Suresh. She posts about everything from that freshly baked sourdough to unexpectedly tasty tofu stir fries and super healthy moong dal cheela (flour-based Indian pancake), via her Instagram handle.

For Dr Suresh, a nutritionist and “healthy weight management coach” based in Bengaluru, social media is a powerful tool. It helps her communicate her healthy lifestyle philosophy and also, connect with like-minded folks and followers (who may or may not seek out her advice). It’s also an easy way to showcase her support for small businesses in the health/wellness and nutrition space. Like for example, companies that make moong dal cheela mixes or provide subscription-based products/produce (nut butters/spreads, sourdough, micro greens, seasoning and more). “I love food and trying out different cuisines, but my basic diet plan is very simple — veggies, proteins, carbohydrates and healthy fats daily, with salads etc., on the side. I snack on fruit bowls, energy/protein bars, nuts and seeds, but avoid desserts because of the specific goals I have for myself,” she explains. But Dr Suresh also understands that clients may have different needs and issues. That’s where healthy food products come in. “While I always recommend eating freshly prepared home-cooked food, not everyone has the time and energy to do that, so food products that are healthy make it convenient and comfortable for busy individuals without compromising on their health. I definitely don’t think this is just a fad or a healthy living trend,” she states.

From moong dal mixes to ‘mock’ meats
Sagar Mehta agrees with the health influencer. He, for one, believes that the trend in ‘healthier’ foods/products can transform into a sustainable lifestyle choice. And the proof, he believes, is in the steady growth of a vegan platform for plant-based foods/food products he co-founded in 2019. “India is going to be the one of the greatest hubs for plant-based foods. The vibrant diversity found in Indian foods is unmatched by that of any other country,” he stresses. Mehta says his platform is a sign of the changing times. Currently, his site features 2,500+ products, but that number can vary as new products get listed. Plant-based dairy, meat and protein alternatives are among the most popular offerings. In fact, moong dal features prominently in a plant-based ‘vegan egg’ (sold in liquid form and currently available only in Bengaluru)! “Nutritionally, these are healthier (than regular dairy/meats) and do not contain cholesterol or lactose. Some of the ‘mock’ meats (based either on jackfruit or soya) even contain higher values of protein and fibre. Our top-selling ghee alternative, for example, contains very low saturated fats and no cholesterol. Our focus is to give people the confidence that living a plant-based life is easier than previously thought. A vegan lifestyle provides greater long-term health benefits and there is also the tremendous positive impact on the lives of animals and the planet,” stresses Mehta.

Look at the labels
Through their work, both the entrepreneur and the nutrition-enthusiast engage with a slice of a potentially huge pool — the Indians who access the Internet and possibly also, use social media messaging/networking platforms for healthy lifestyle advice, wellness and weight management tips. The total numbers involved are mind boggling. According to a September 2020 report on Analytics Insight (a platform that tracks data-driven technologies), India already has 687.6 million Internet users and is estimated to reach one billion Internet users by 2025. This begs the question, are smart-phone-owning Indians (and those who don’t) really eating healthier and making the right lifestyle and diet choices? According to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)’s Eat Right India campaign, 135 million Indians are overweight or obese and at risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. The statistics are a cause for concern, says Inoshi Sharma, Director for Social and Behavioural Change (SBCD) at FSSAI. “Looking at the NCD risk profile of our country as per National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-4 and 5) data, consumption of healthy foods low in salt, sugar, fat and high in dietary fibre and protein is the need of the hour,” she says. At the same time, Sharma cautions against simply consuming foods promoted as ‘healthy’. “The market today is flooded with ‘health food’ options. It is vital to first check the fat, sugar and



Inoshi Sharma



Dr Nikita Suresh

salt content as people are often not aware about the right intake of salt and sugar in their daily diet or its hidden presence in processed food. With growing sedentary lifestyles especially in urban areas, there is a need to choose foods products carefully and not get carried away by big claims and advertisements. FSSAI, through the Eat Right India campaign, is urging people to choose foods that are safe, healthy and sustainable,” she stresses.

Too much and too little
But, there is also cruel irony here. While some Indians are obese, more Indians are now underweight. Data from the Eat Right India campaign notes that 196 million Indians, a majority of them women, are malnourished. Moreover, acute malnourishment or wasting in children below five years of age, has worsened, reveals NHFS-5

Healthier by apps alone?

Today, there are innumerable apps providing calorie-counted diet plans, weight management and fitness advice — all just a download away. Are the tips/diet plans etc., practical especially when you are an always-working-at-home woman? *DHoS* decided to find out.

A while ago, Maya Mathew, who works in the education space and is based in Kochi, Kerala, downloaded one of the most popular apps. Mathew is active; she cycles, does Zumba and yoga regularly. But she wanted to overhaul her diet and also, lose a little weight. “The app recommends healthy food options per meal, depending on the amount of weight you want to lose, the health conditions you have etc. The app also specifies the quantity you can eat at each meal — like one *katori*, and so on. If you stick to the plan, then yes, you will definitely lose weight. I did follow it for a few days, but then, it became too cumbersome — I ended up cooking different foods

for every meal because my teenager refused to eat my ‘healthy’ food! Incidentally, my neighbour also downloaded the same app. She followed the meal plans for a month or two and lost weight. However, she too found it impractical to keep cooking extra food for every meal every day, because her family also refused to eat her ‘healthy’ food!” Maya says for women like her, only apps that can home deliver healthy pre-cooked and calorie-counted meals (on a budget), will be practical. Perhaps the Indian men who sign up for such apps find it easy to follow specified meal plans... because may be their wives do all the cooking?



data. Reasons include poor maternal nutrition as well as the lack of availability and access to nutritious food. On a policy level, it is hoped that food fortification can address malnutrition in women and children.

“Under Eat Right India, a variety of foods are being promoted, considering our vast diversity in diet, culture, customs etc., for wholesome nutrition. Food fortification is also being promoted on a large scale to address micronutrient deficiencies. A draft

notification for mandatory fortification of oil and milk with vitamin A and D has been published for comments. The case for mandatory fortification of rice with iron and folic acid and vitamin B12 is also being pursued strongly with the government,” emphasises Sharma.

What you can do
On a collective level, the country may now be grappling with obesity and chronic malnutrition balancing the scales. But, at an individual level, there are things we can do to stay healthy, says Sagar Mehta — himself a passionate vegan. He believes it is imperative that “we all become better informed about what we eat and why. Every individual should learn to understand the nutritional values of foods,” he stresses. Dr Suresh, the new-age nutritionist, on her part, urges people to think well before they eat well. “An important example is cereals and muesli, promoted as healthy breakfast alternatives. These are healthy, but sometimes also contain many additives especially sugars/sweeteners. That’s where the serving size of the foods should be taken into account. For example, cashew cheese (vegan cheese) is healthy, but if eaten in large quantities, will contribute to a higher caloric and fat intake,” she points out. But food alone will not lead to better health, no matter how attractively presented on social media. It’s also about how active you are — that’s what Dr Suresh counsels her clients. For, she also happens to be a Zumba instructor. “Fitness and nutrition go hand in hand. I’ve seen students who exercise regularly or over-exercise even, but do not follow a healthy eating pattern, because of which they don’t see results. You can never out-run a bad diet,” she adds wryly.



Better food labels in the offing?
Recently, the findings of an ongoing global study on the relationship between nutrition and food were released. The Nutri-Net Santé study, which was initiated in 2009, is reportedly the largest such ongoing project. The researchers of the study believe conventional food product information (levels of fat, sugar, and other ingredients) is inadequate; that food labels must indicate if a product is ‘healthful’. Hence, these researchers have designed a Nutri-Score or colour-based labelling system, giving food products a score from A to E — with A (green) being the ‘most’ healthful and E (red) the ‘least’ healthful. The good news is that FSSAI is also looking at changing food labelling, says Inoshi Sharma. “FSSAI is considering implementing easily decipherable front-of-the-pack nutrition labelling (FOPL). In 2018, the first draft regulations for FOPL were published. Since then, we have had consultations with stakeholders

— ministries, industry associations and consumer organisations — to build some degree of consensus, so that it can be rolled out quickly,” she says. FOPL will make it easier for consumers to choose healthy food options. “FSSAI is also considering symbols, colour codes, warnings etc., (for high levels of fat, sugar and sodium), or alternate ways of depiction on the FOPL. However, this is still under discussion and is yet to be finalised,” adds Sharma.

Dear reader,
We would love you to share your healthy eating experiences with us. Have you experimented with a long-forgotten vegetable? Are you a millet king/queen? Has a meal plan worked like magic for you? Has a diet regimen made you tear your hair out? Write to us at dhonsunday@deccanherald.co.in. The best three responses will be published online on our website www.deccanherald.co.in on April 25. Last date for responses is April 17, 2021.