State health ministers pledge to set up robust national food testing system

The Union health minister also urged the state governments to use FSSAI's 'Pink Book' for households and 'Yellow' Book aimed at children, both detailing how to eat right.

Health ministers of all states today pledged to set up a robust national food testing system by ensuring adequate number of laboratories and focus on nutrition by promoting healthy dietary habits and addressing rising incidences of obesity and noncommunicable diseases.

It was part of a draft joint declaration decided upon after a roundtable organised by the Union health ministry and food regulator FSSAI with state health ministers to review the challenges and opportunities for ensuring availability of safe and wholesome food to the people.

"The Central government is providing support to the tune of Rs 482 crore for the states. As many as 45 state laboratories are to be strengthened," Union Health Minister J P Nadda said.
"I request the states to come forward with the proposals or give us the plan for strengthening the laboratories," he said and highlighted various initiatives taken by the Centre in this regard.

Asserting that funds will not be a constraint, Nadda said each state should have at least one government high-quality food testing laboratory with bigger states having at least two such facilities.

On enforcement of food standards, he said there should be fairness and transparency.

"We must safeguard public health by ensuring all food businesses are licensed and follow standards. At the same time, we should be careful that it does not put unnecessary regulatory burden on food businesses," the Union minister said.

Nadda said sensitisation on issues was a major area to work for and FSSAI can provide support in this so that people opt for self-regulation.

Participants of the roundtable affirmed their commitment to creating a unified framework for an integrated food control system by putting in place effective systems and processes for ensuring safe and wholesome food for all citizens by adopting a seven-point charter.

This includes supporting development of robust food standards and code of practices for safe food, creating a positive regulatory environment, establishing a credible and robust national food testing system and addressing micro- nutrient deficiencies and promoting healthy dietary habits, the draft declaration read.

It also talks about bringing a large-scale social and behavioural change in citizens on safe and nutritious food, building a culture of self-compliance in food businesses and developing effective institutions and institutional arrangements backed with competent human resources and adequate financial resources.

State health ministers decided to launch a campaign with focus on youngsters and school children for limiting their energy intake from fat to less than 30 per cent of the total daily calorie intake and eliminate trans-fats completely.
They also decided to promote and encourage supplies, distribution and retailing of fortified staples in the public distribution system as well as open market.

The ministers assured to work towards creating a culture of self-compliance among food businesses by helping them build internal capacities, focus on third party audit among other things.

During the roundtable, Nadda released a framework for 'Clean Street Food Hubs' and 'Safe and Hygienic Food Festivals'.

He also released FSSAI's 'Healthy India Food Calendar', the first of its kind calendar which covers India's main festivals, the food associated with them and their nutritional benefits.

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