FSSAI, industry differ on reformulating foods high in fat, salt, sugar

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Food High on Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) has been a bone of contention between the food regulator and the industry as the latter feels that this would force the companies to redraw their product line and reformulate their products. The FSSAI however says that industry by and large supports this cause and the big players at least have taken this initiative to voluntarily reduce the fat, salt, and sugar from their products.

Several rounds of meetings were held between the industry and the regulator wherein discussions were held on how to address the issue related to HFSS.

While there was serious push from consumer organisations, and equal resistance from the industry, which is why the recently proposed draft on labelling by the FSSAI has been referred to a high level committee constituted by the Health Ministry.

In this proposed labelling regulations, the apex food regulator has asked the FBOs to put out a traffic signal type of representation to define the quantity of salt and sugar along with fat, which becomes red for the higher content, exceeding a limit.

To address front of pack nutrition labelling, the mandatory declaration of energy, saturated fat, trans fat, added sugar and sodium with their per cent (%) contribution to RDA (Recommended Dietary Allowance) on the front of pack has been included in the proposed labelling requirements, per serve percentage (%) contribution to RDA shall be calculated on the basis of 2,000 kcal energy, 22g saturated fat, 2 g trans fat, 50 g added sugar and 2,000mg sodium requirement for average adult per day.

Exceeding the limit
Further industry was asked to put a red dot wherever the amount of HFSS is exceeding the limit. This is illustrated in Front of Pack Labelling of HFSS Foods.

A deliberation was held between the industry and the regulator which resulted into formation of the expert committee which is looking into the subject of product labelling for
HFSS and is expected to come out with its recommendations soon.

FSSAI says that as part of the 'Eat Right Movement,' food businesses have been nudged to promote healthier food options in several ways these also include - Reformulation of food products by major food companies to reduce the content of sugar and salt in packaged food and Provision of healthier food options by the food services sector and introduction of menu labelling on nutrition information.

Public health and welfare Dr Shweta Khandelwal, head, nutrition research, Public Health Foundation of India, says that industry is an important partner in holistic development. They need to be involved but their commercial interests should not dominate or undermine public health and welfare in any manner.

She states, “The food industry, in general, deliberately seeks to shape the evidence base on diet- and public health-related issues, and establish relationships with governments, key scientific bodies and medical associations in order to have influence over them. There is enough documented evidence on this. However, once the policy around the regulation of HFSS is robustly formulated and strictly implemented, they will have to comply.”

Khandelwal adds, “Some of the more sensitive and informed companies have started making small changes already - commitment to reduce sugars in their products, signing pledges to invest in production and sale of more healthy products, decrease salt content, using healthier oils etc. But a lot more is required from all stakeholders.”

She added that a related issue is advertising and huge investments made to influence consumers especially the vulnerable ones by making misleading ads to promote sale of ultra-processed foods. Much stricter control on advertising norms is urgently needed.

The industry however says that it should be left to the consumers what they want to eat or not.