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New standards for fortifying foods released

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) on Sunday released new standards on fortification on food. The guidelines are meant to regulate the fortification of food, especially packaged food, with essential micronutrients to counter rising malnutrition in the country.

Anupriya Patel, Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, while releasing the standards, said that fortification of food is seen as a culturally acceptable method that can be introduced quickly and economically with significant advantages.

She added that the government, on its part, would ensure schemes such as Integrated Child Development Scheme, the midday meal scheme and public distribution system are mandated to buy and distribute fortified food to end malnutrition.

Changing food patterns are seen as one of the leading causes of micronutrient deficiency in the country, Ashish Bahuguna, Chairman of FSSAI said. Fortification of food is accepted as an efficient and economic way of reducing deficiency according to experts. In India iodine-fortified salt has shown success in curbing incidents of deficiency related diseases such as hypothyroidism and goiter.

Bahuguna said that while India has achieved success in boosting food production to the point that it is now an exporter of several food products, it has not been able to battle the hidden hunger of malnutrition. Fortification of commonly-eaten foods, in addition to encouraging balanced diets, would help the country fight this problem, he said.

Pawan Agarwal, Chief Executive Officer of FSSAI said that some of the food products that are going to be fortified with immediate effect are wheat flour, rice, oil and milk, besides salt.

FSSAI IN NEWS

Agarwal, however, admitted that the large-scale production, processing and packaging of some of the food products, especially wheat flour and rice, by the unorganised sector would make implementation a challenge. The standards are expected to see minor changes following stakeholder consultations.

Consumer Affairs Minister Ram Vilas Paswan, however, also warned against adulteration of food, which he berated as a common and accepted malpractice. Standards around fortified food need to ensure there are strict laws around purity, he said.

Hameed Nuru, Representative and Country Director, World Food Programme, meanwhile stressed that the cost of ignoring malnutrition is high — an estimated \$3.5 trillion annually. He said every dollar spent on fortifying food to combat malnutrition is estimated to give a return of \$30. “So, fortifying is the smart thing to do,” he said.

Diet — both over and under-nutrition — is one of the three leading health risks in India currently along with heart diseases and pollution and is a major determinant of health, Soumya Swaminathan, Director General of the Indian Council Medical Research said.
