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Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) in partnership with Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi) Pediatric and Adolescent Nutrition Society (PAN) -IAP Nutrition Chapter, Epidemiology Foundation of India (EFI), Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine (IAPSM) and Indian Public Health Association (IPHA).

Strong Warning Labels on Unhealthy Food Products is a Human Right: Public Health Experts Call for Urgent Action

New Delhi: 27 August 2021. Top doctors including paediatricians and public health experts gathered today to discuss the urgent need for adoption of front-of-pack warning labels on all unhealthy food products if India is to safeguard people's lives from the looming crisis of non communicable diseases. Citing recent research that overconsumption of ultra processed foods (UPF) and beverages lead to overweight and obesity – key risk factors for cancer, cardiovascular disease, non alcoholic fatty liver and various other deadly diseases; BPNI, Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi) <http://www.napiindia.in/> and several public health organisations called upon the Government of India to urgently consider application of mandatory warning labels on ultra-processed foods and food products high in sugar/salt or saturated fat.

The webinar was chaired by Dr.Suneela Garg, President , Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine (IAPSM) and she said *“Right-to-health is a fundamental right of every human being & youths health is Nations wealth .Therefore in Indian context, states are required to adopt regulatory measures such as front-of-package warning labelling on foods and beverages containing excessive amounts of critical nutrients such as sugar to tackle the rising burden of obesity and NCDs.”*

Experts from Pediatric and Adolescent Nutrition Society (PAN) -IAP Nutrition Chapter and Epidemiology Foundation of India (EFI) pointed out that the food industry wants to delay and dilute the warning labels guidelines as there is vested interest. They emphasized that marketing of packaged food items are a health hazard for children under 5 years and adolescents as they are the most vulnerable group to NCDs because of unhealthy food products consumption.

Presenting evidence from around the world, Neha Khandpur, an expert and faculty of public health from University of Sao Paulo, Brazil's Centre for Nutrition said, *“Warning labels have consistently been shown to be most effective at improving consumer understanding, at influencing their purchase decisions and at supporting healthy food choices. They also are most likely to encourage product reformulation. Warning labels are the strongest nutrient-based label that India should consider implementing”*.

According to Euromonitor estimates, the sale of UPF has increased from 2 kg per capita in 2005, to 6kg in 2019 and is expected to grow to 8kg in 2024. Similarly, beverages have gone up from less than 2 L in 2005 to about 8 L in 2019 and are expected to grow to 10 L in 2024.

Dr Arun Gupta , convenor of Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi), a national think tank working on nutrition policy, said *“This is happening at a time in India showing a tremendous rise in sales of ultra processed food (UPF) products both in the category of food and beverages. If we don't put a break to this rise now, India will join the club of obesity epidemic's developed nations like UK and USA in the coming decade. Food industry is meant for making profits for their shareholders and will not comply unless our food and beverage regulators make it mandatory.”*

Ms. Pushpa Girimaji, Consumer Rights Columnist and Consumer Safety Advocate pointed out that *“the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 gave consumers the right to be protected from unsafe and unhealthy food through clear and unambiguous label information and appropriate warning in a manner that is easily comprehended by all, including those who cannot read or understand the label. But far more important, the Supreme Court, in Centre for Public Interest Litigation Vs Union of India, had interpreted the right to safe food as part of the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution, read with Article 47, (Directive Principles of State Policy) that casts a duty on the state to raise the level of nutrition and improve public health.”*

So, in order to enforce these rights fully and protect citizen/consumer interest, the State or more specifically, the FSSAI, should introduce a front of label colour coding or such other easily comprehensible warning labels on foods high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat, she said. S advocated consumer education about the consequences of consuming foods high in sugar, salt and saturated fat and a ban on celebrity endorsement of such food.

Prof. HPS Sachdev, country's leading researcher on nutrition summed up to have strong and mandatory warning label based on the WHO thresholds of nutrient profile modelling because 50% of the children's population is suffering from cardiometabolic risk factors as per the CNNS, 2016-18 survey due to unhealthy packaged food consumption.

ENDS

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