Red Hexagon Warning Labels for Packaged Foods

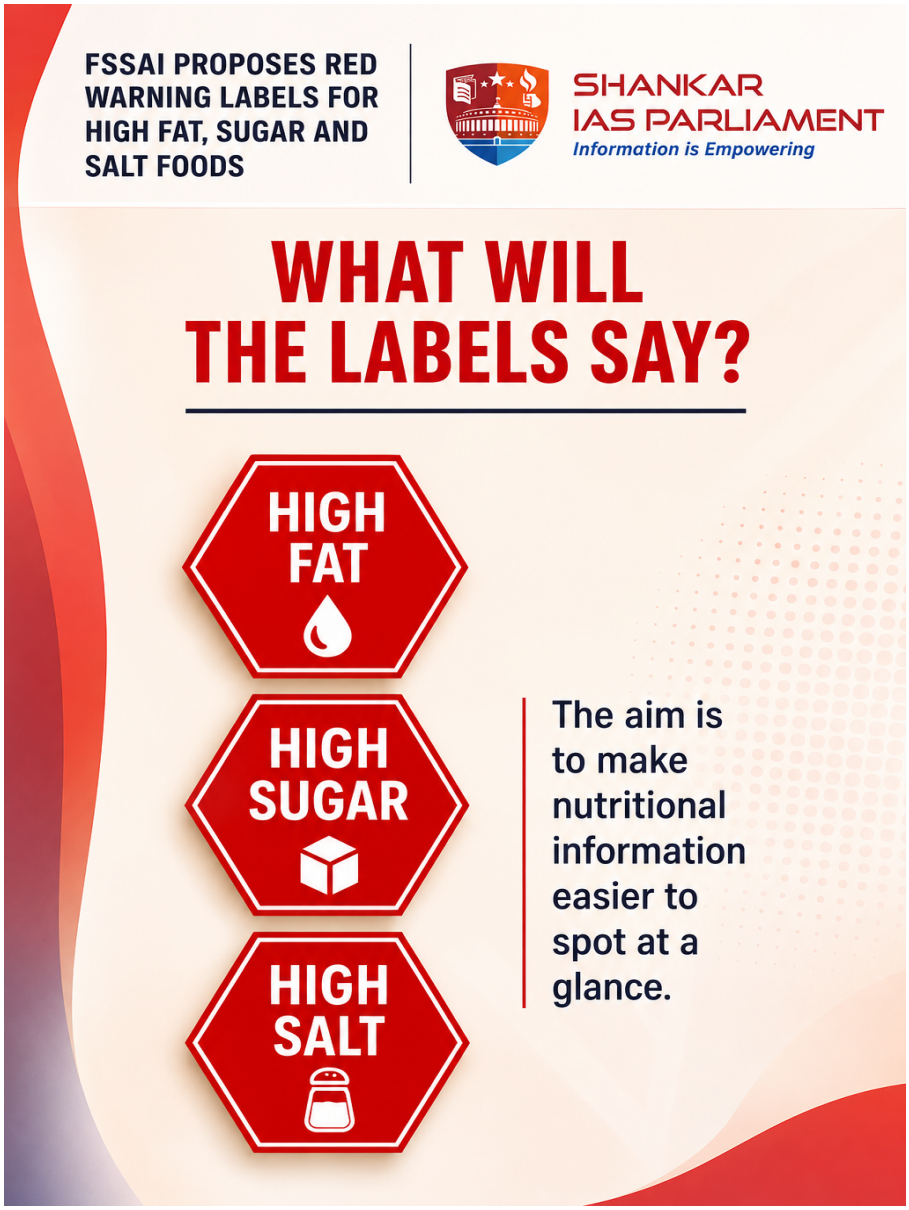
Mains: *GSII – Governance*

Why in News?

Recently, the FSSAI has proposed, in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, a red hexagonal warning label on the front of packaged food products, aimed at enabling consumers to identify potentially unhealthy packaged foods.

What is Front-of-Pack Labelling (FOPL)?

- **FOPL** – It provides simplified nutritional information on the front of food packages.
- It helps consumers quickly identify foods containing excessive levels of nutrients associated with health risks.
- It is an interpretive labelling system, as it goes beyond merely providing numerical nutritional information.



Why is FOPL important?

- **Tackling non-communicable diseases** – Excessive intake of sugar, salt and saturated fat is associated with Obesity, Diabetes, Hypertension, and Cardiovascular diseases.
- **Consumer empowerment** – Conventional nutrition panels can be difficult for consumers to interpret. A prominent warning can facilitate quick and informed food choices.
- **Countering misleading health claims –** Marketing terms such as “natural”, “multigrain” or “healthy” can create a perception that a product is nutritious.
    - Warning labels can help consumers assess the actual nutritional profile.
- **Encouraging product reformulation** – Mandatory warnings could encourage manufacturers to reduce Added sugar, Salt, Saturated fat.
    - This can promote the production of healthier processed foods.

What is the proposed FSSAI framework?

- **Warning symbol** – Red hexagon on the front of the package.

- **Nutrients of concern** – *Added sugar, Added saturated fat, Salt.*
- **Phase I** – Warning would apply to products high in two or more of these three nutrients.
- **Phase II** – Warning would be extended to products high in any one of the three nutrients.
- **Highly sweetened beverages** – Specified highly sweetened beverages would also come under the warning framework.
- **Nutritional thresholds** – Proposed to be based on the ICMR-NIN Dietary Guidelines for Indians, 2024.
- The framework refers to added sugar and added saturated fat, *rather than total sugar and total fat.*
- *Single-ingredient foods* and products inherently rich in these nutrients, including ghee, edible oil, jaggery and honey, are also *proposed to be exempt*.

Note – The framework is still a proposal and has not yet become a notified regulation.

What are the concerns associated with the FSSAI framework?

- **Two-Nutrient Requirement** – During Phase I, a product must be high in at least two nutrients to receive the warning.
    - A product high only in sugar, salt or saturated fat could potentially escape the warning.
- **Added vs Total Sugar and Fat** – Using added sugar and added saturated fat rather than total sugar and total fat could leave certain products outside the framework.
- **Ambiguity in definition** – Scientific clarity is required regarding the definition of "high" levels.
- **Absence of a Fixed Timeline for Phase II** – FSSAI has not specified a firm deadline for moving from Phase I to Phase II.
    - This could led to prolonged implementation of a weaker initial framework.
- **Exclusions concerns** – Exemptions for products such as ghee, edible oil, jaggery and honey need to be supported by clear scientific reasoning.
    - Excessive exemptions could reduce the effectiveness of the system.
- **Size and Visibility** – Warning labels need to be sufficiently large, prominent and easily identifiable. A poorly visible warning may have limited behavioural impact.
- **Language Accessibility** – India's linguistic diversity creates challenges regarding the language used on warning labels.
    - Effective communication should account for regional and linguistic diversity.

What could be done?

- **India-specific thresholds** – Introduce scientifically robust and India-specific nutrient thresholds based on Indian dietary patterns and health outcomes.
- **Single-nutrient warning mechanism** – Consider imposing warnings when a product is high in any one nutrient of concern rather than requiring two nutrients.
- **Time-bound implementation** – Establish a clear and definite timeline for Phase II to prevent prolonged reliance on the initial framework.
- **Visibility & prominence** – Ensure warning labels are large, prominent and easily visible to enable quick consumer recognition.

- **Multilingual accessibility** – Develop appropriate multilingual communication mechanisms to make warnings accessible across India's diverse linguistic population.
- **Evidence-based exemptions** – Review product exemptions using scientific evidence and nutritional risk assessment.
- **Periodic review of standards** – Periodically revise nutrient thresholds based on changing dietary patterns, scientific evidence and health outcomes.
- **Nutrition education** – Combine FOPL with consumer awareness campaigns and nutrition education to improve interpretation and behavioural change.
- **Industry reformulation** – Encourage the food-processing industry to undertake voluntary as well as mandatory reformulation to reduce excessive sugar.

What is its significance for India?

- It strengthens India's approach towards **preventive healthcare**.
- It supports efforts **to tackle the growing burden of NCDs**.
- It **improves nutrition literacy** among consumers.
- It promotes **informed consumer choice.**
- It encourages food companies to undertake **health-oriented reformulation.**
- It **strengthens the role of FSSAI** in food safety and public-health regulation.

What lies ahead?

- FSSAI’s proposed red-hexagon label represents a shift from merely providing nutritional information to clearly communicating nutritional risk.
- A scientifically robust, visible and comprehensive FOPL system can empower consumers, and contribute to India's fight against non-communicable diseases.

References

1. The Hindu| Red Hexagon Warning Labels for Packaged Foods
2. The Indian Express| Red warning labels for unhealthy packaged snacks

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