

## 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.

## WHAT WILL THE LABELS SAY?



The aim is  
to make  
nutritional  
information  
easier to  
spot at a  
glance.

### 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 lead 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](#)