



FSSAI notification discourages simultaneous handling of food, currency

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FSSAI has issued a notification to the food safety commissioners of all states and Union Territories (UTs) to initiate a systematic campaign to generate awareness amongst all citizens to discourage the simultaneous handling of food and currency notes or coins, which are widely exchanged for goods and services by all sections of society.

The country's apex food regulator has taken into consideration the impact of cross-contamination, which, according to the notification, occurs when currency is handled with unclean and soiled hands, saliva is used during counting and food is stored in unhygienic conditions, where it comes into contact with harmful microorganisms.

Asmita Thakkar, officer, hospitality management, Raisions Group of Institutions, Nagpur, and food safety training and certification (FoSTaC) trainer, FSSAI, stated, "India is one of the biggest democracies in the world."

"The implementation of any new policy has always been a challenge, and the one concerning the handling of currency handling and cross-contamination will be no different. Currency and coins are surely a source of contamination from the handler to the food if he is handling them simultaneously. Initiating this issue is a good move by FSSAI," she added.

The notification stated that cross-contamination from currency led to a host of diseases, including food poisoning, skin diseases and respiratory and gastrointestinal infections, and posed a risk to human health. Children, pregnant women, aged and immune-compromised persons are particularly vulnerable to such infections.

Commenting on the same, Thakkar said, "Cross-contamination is as dangerous as any other in the food chain, because again, the common element is 'food handler: human being'."

"Street vendors are majorly, and probably the only source for this kind of cross-contamination, though currency handling was never considered as food safety issue. Bacteria commonly contaminating food through handlers are E coli, Clostridium perfringens, Entamoeba histolytica, norovirus, salmonella and shigella,

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which belong to a life-threatening group,” she added.

Food vendors, especially street food vendors, often prepare and serve food and collect money from patrons using the same hand. They have been instructed to avoid handling currency and food simultaneously.

In this direction, FSSAI has recommended that the handling of food and money should be physically separated, and that while gloves are used to handle food, bare hands should be used to handle currency.

“After handling currency, hands should be thoroughly washed before touching food items and vice-versa,” the notification stated.

Thaokar said, “Spreading awareness will have a positive effect on vendors and consumers as well. FSSAI, which has succeeded in its move to ban the use of newspaper to serve street food, could succeed in its currency-handling order too.”

“However, washing hands every time after handling currency may not be possible for either the busy vendors or the consumers, who are always in a hurry. Moreover, street vendors may not have enough water and facilities to do so,” she added.

“Removing gloves and wearing them again after handling currency look impossible. The issue of safety, with regard to gloves, will be compromised in this,” Thaokar said.

“The vendor can try to control the spread by keeping extra hand/assistant for handling of currency exclusively, but that will add to his costing. If the consumer understands the genuine reason and agrees to pay that extra rupee for his protection, the move will be successful,” she added.

“This time, FSSAI will get a better response than before, since the stakeholders are already aware of the food safety moves and know that they will have to follow them someday anyway, if mandatory,” Thaokar stated.

Meanwhile, an official from Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Maharashtra said, “FSSAI’s notification on currency notes and coins, a source of microbiological contamination, is a good move, but at the same time, it is very challenging. The well-educated and knowledgeable food vendors would not face a problem dealing with it, but educating small-time vendors across every nook and corner of the state could take a long time.”