



**FSSAI launches Project Dhoop to combat Vitamin D Deficiencies among young**

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**Our Bureau, New Delhi**

In order to address rising incidence of Vitamin 'D' Deficiencies (VDD), particularly amongst the young people, FSSAI has launched a unique initiative, 'Project Dhoop' in association with NCERT, NDMC and North MCD Schools.

Supported by Kwality and conceptualised by McCann Health, the initiative urges schools to shift their morning assembly to noon time mainly between 11 am and 1 pm to ensure maximum absorption of Vitamin D in students through natural sunlight.

Micronutrients including vitamins are needed by people in only very small amounts, but these are the "magic wands" that enable the body to produce enzymes, hormones and other substances essential for proper growth and development. As tiny as the amounts are, the consequences of their absence are severe. Vitamin A, D, B12, Iron, Folic Acid and Iodine, are the most important; their lack represents a major threat to the health and development of populations the world over, particularly children and pregnant women in countries like India.

For Vitamin D, fish and fish products are the only real food sources. For most Indians, Vitamin D is mainly obtained by exposure to sunlight without which deficiency is likely to occur. Sunlight's action on cholesterol in the skin converts the cholesterol to Vitamin D via additional conversions in the liver and kidneys. Many factors can contribute to VDD such as overuse of sun screen, wearing clothes that cover most of the skin, working inside all day in air-conditioned atmosphere and so on.

Most parts of India receive abundant sunshine all the year through. Yet shockingly, studies have found that more than 90% of boys and girls across various Indian cities are deficient in Vitamin D.

In Delhi alone, 90-97% of school children (aged 6-17 years) have VDD and around 10-11% of these children exhibit signs of VDD.

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At the launch event of the initiative, organised at National Bal Bhavan, Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI, said, "Despite the fact that most children suffer from Vitamin D Deficiency in India, most of us are not aware of its serious consequences. FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) has always endeavoured to educate the community about such pressing issues. Project Dhoop's Noon Assembly is an innovative and effective concept to ensure that school students get adequate Vitamin D through sunlight, while also opting to choose food products like milk and edible oils that are fortified with Vitamins A and D."

He pointed out that opting for fortified foods (with +F symbol) is a simple and inexpensive way to address micronutrient deficiencies without any radical change in behaviour or eating patterns. According to him, both fortified milk and fortified edible oil are now readily available across the country.

Speaking at the launch event, retired Maj. Gen. Dr R K Marwaha, scientific advisor and senior consultant, endocrinology, said, "Human body needs adequate Vitamin D to make its bones strong and other systemic functions of body. Nearly 90% of body's Vitamin D requirement is met by adequate exposure to sunlight and only 10% is met through diet. Contrary to popular belief that morning sunshine is best for our bones, it is actually the sunshine from 11 am to 1 pm that is most beneficial in increasing Vitamin D levels in human body because of best UVB radiations."

He added, "Interestingly, 40-60% of the adult bone mass is accumulated during childhood. Hence, it is very important that children are exposed to sunshine for stronger bones and immune system."

He stated that we can all get abundant Vitamin D from sunshine by exposing only 18% of body surface area (without sunscreen) to sunshine at noon for 30-45 minutes. He suggested, "If the school uniforms are designed such that both forearms and face are exposed to sunlight easily, this would be equivalent to 12% of body surface area. Hence, by the simple act of shifting morning assembly in our schools to noon assembly and careful designing of school uniforms, a large percentage of student's Vitamin D requirement will be met."

Participating on the occasion, representatives of NCERT, NDMC and North MCD Schools and school authorities stated, "We are very happy to be a part of the 'Project Dhoop' and would definitely look at this opportunity seriously, considering that the noon assembly takes advantage of the freely available sunshine. We shall advise all schools to shift morning assembly to noon assembly. This little step can help children grow into healthy adults."

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Naval Sharma, president and head of business transformation, Kwality, stated that recognising the vital role of Vitamin D in our diets, Kwality has fortified many of its milk and milk products with Vitamin D and other essential nutrients. We are proud to support FSSAI's +F fortified logo on our products and be a part of Project Dhoop Initiative.

Ashish Bahuguna, chairperson, FSSAI, stated, "The launch of Project Dhoop this year on the occasion of World Health Day is very timely. He hoped that this would spread awareness about Vitamin D and encourage exposure to sunlight by people across the country."

The launch event concluded with a formation of the '+F' logo by the participating students and school children imbibing information about Vitamin D, measures to increase Vitamin D intake through natural sunlight as well as urging their guardians to opt for fortified food. The event saw participation of about 600 school children from schools in the National Capital Region of Delhi including the NDMC, North MCD and private schools. The school children were ingrained with the concept of healthy nutrition, food fortification and importance of Vitamin D through entertaining skits involving health mascots of FSSAI, songs and dance performances.