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Food safety body launches workplace initiative for safe, nutritious food

This initiative is an effort to prevent an increase in obesity and non-communicable diseases across the country.

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BENGALURU: In an effort to improve nutrition of lakhs of office-going Indians, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), country's premier food watchdog, launched the SNF@Workplace initiative (Safe and Nutritious Food at Workplace) recently. This initiative is an effort to prevent an increase in obesity and non-communicable diseases across the country.

Due to lack of time to bring home-cooked food, employees have at least one meal in office (mostly lunch) and this initiative hopes to ensure that this meal is healthy and nutritious. Interested workplaces can get empaneled audit agencies to check their organisations. Reviewed workplaces will be given

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rating with 3, 4 or 5 stars based on quality of food and canteens as well as the activities focused around ensuring food safety.

As a part of this initiative, a resource book called 'Orange Book: Your Guide for Safe and Nutritious Food at the Workplace', developed by a team of food safety experts and nutritionists from premier institutions in the country, has also been released. It is available for free download on FSSAI's website. Further, FSSAI plan to rate workplaces as "Healthy Places to Work" based on the practices mentioned in this book.

Sheela Krishnaswamy, a city-based Diet, Nutrition and Wellness Consultant, and National President, Indian Dietic Association, who was one of the panel experts who drafted the Orange Book and gave the nutritional input to the book, told The New Indian Express, "With respect to Bengaluru, there are several factors that contribute to unhealthy eating habits at work. There is lack of time to pack home-cooked food, which makes employees dependent on cafeterias. In the IT capital, a large part of the workforce is migrant population who doesn't live with their families. Longer commute time can also be a reason for not bringing their own food."

She recommends providing nutrient-dense but low in fat, sugar and salt foods for meals snacks and drinks. "At least 50% of the menu options should fall under this category. Fresh seasonal fruits, vegetables — especially, green leafy vegetables, salads, bread, rotis — made from whole grain or multigrains is ideal," she said.

The Orange Book is organised into three parts. The first part is meant for HR/Administration. It includes specific measures that the workplace administration can take in order to create a system and an enabling environment to ensure food safety and nutrition for everyone at the workplace.

The second part is for the canteen or cafeteria establishment. It specifies best practices and guidelines recommended for the canteen establishment to ensure that the food served in the workplace, whether prepared in-house or catered from outside, is safe and wholesome. The third part is for employees. It provides several important do's and don'ts, useful tips and suggestions to empower employees to eat and stay healthy at the workplace by making informed choices about the food they consume.

33.4% women, 27.5% men are overweight or obese in Urban Bengaluru

Obesity and hypertension among Indians is a rising problem, especially among working women. According to some studies, 46% of the workforce suffers from some form of stress. In a city like Bengaluru, where many

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people work during odd hours, the chances of eating from outside or suffering from cholesterol and other lifestyle disorders is high.

According to the National Family Health Survey - 4 (2015-16), in Bengaluru's urban areas, 33.4% women and 27.5% men are overweight or obese. With respect to hypertension among adults, 5.1% women had blood pressure slightly above normal, 1.6% had moderately high BP and 0.3% had very high BP. As far as men go, 9.9% had slightly above normal BP, 1% had moderately high BP and 0.8% had very high BP. In urban areas, 8.7% women had high blood sugar level and 4.1% had very high levels. Among men, 8.8% had high blood sugar level and 4.6% had very high blood sugar levels. Helping people eat safe and eat right at work therefore assumes significance.

Educating people on safe and healthy diets and developing an overall ecosystem for safe and nutritious food in work places, is important. Nutritionist Sheela Krishnaswamy said, "Even carrying a lunch box from home is not sufficient. What is the point if people end up carrying only rice related dishes like tamarind rice, lemon rice or curd rice? Rice is high on carbohydrates. There should be a healthy mix of foods like fresh fruits instead of fries and assorted nuts instead of foods with preservatives."