

FSSAI holds Chandigarh workshop to highlight importance of fortification

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FSSAI organised a workshop in Chandigarh to engage and sensitise the local media about the importance of food fortification. In an attempt to address widespread micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia, the country's apex food regulator took a step ahead by boosting efforts towards large-scale fortification of food in the states of Haryana and Punjab and the Union Territory (UT) of Chandigarh.

Other health and nutrition-related interventions, such as the importance of nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life; reducing the consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS), and food safety were also covered. Since the majority of people are unaware of food fortification and its health benefits, this workshop served as a stepping-stone to bridge this knowledge gap.

The workshop was followed by the state launch of the Eat Right India Movement in Chandigarh. The six-month media partnership programme is a joint effort of FSSAI, the World Bank and HEAL Foundation, to build sustained awareness among citizens on eating right through the local media was also launched on the occasion.

Key officials from Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh participated at the launch event to support the Eat Right India movement. They included K S Pannu, secretary, agriculture, and commissioner of food safety, Agriculture Department, Government of Punjab and B L Sharma, secretary, education, social welfare, women and child development, Chandigarh. Public health professionals, nutritionists, the medical community, professors from universities and colleges, executive chefs and other local bodies also came together through this common platform to lend their support to this movement.

Speaking on the occasion, Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI, said, "Chandigarh, like the rest of the country, is fighting a dual burden of malnutrition. Such figures, by no means, serve any justice to the city titled The City Beautiful. Hence, FSSAI has selected Chandigarh to be the first city to launch the Eat Right Movement and to take the lead in food fortification-related activities. We hope this will lead to a social and behavioural change among citizens."

Speaking at the launch, Sharma highlighted that the Global Nutrition Report 2017 found 38 per cent of children under five years of age stunted and 21 per cent wasted, 51 per cent women of reproductive age were anaemic and 22 per cent of adult women were overweight.

"Opting for fortified food, ensuring safety of food and consciously reducing intake of food with high sugar, salt and fat are simple ways to improve individual and societal nutrition status," he added.

Citing the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR) 2017 report titled, India: Health of Nation's

States, Dr G Dewan, director of health services and mission direction, National Health Mission said, “Between 1990 and 2016, the burden of diabetes in India has increased manifold.”

“Heart diseases are among the top 10 leading causes of deaths in Punjab and Haryana. The Eat Right India Movement sends a very relevant message that the simple act of reducing fat, salt and sugar in our daily diet can make a strong and positive difference in our health status,” he added.

Emphasising on importance of nutrition in first 1,000 days, Ashi Kathuria, senior nutritionist, World Bank, added, “Nutrition in the early years of life, including the period when the child is in the mother’s womb has a lifelong impact.”

“Recent evidence indicates that adequate nutrition, early learning and stimulation are critical for children to achieve their full human potential in adulthood. Children who receive these in time and in sufficient measure, show better educational attainment, higher incomes and contributions to economic growth,” he added.

As per the National Family Health Survey (NHFS)–IV, almost 76 per cent of the female population in the city of Chandigarh suffer from anaemia – the second highest amongst all states and UTs. The prevalence of anaemia in children aged between six and 59 months, at 73 per cent is the highest in Chandigarh amongst all northern states as well.

Food fortification is a complementary strategy to fight micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia, which is also simple, sustainable, safe and cost-effective. Food fortification is the addition of key vitamins and minerals such as iron, iodine and Vitamins A and D to staple foods, such as wheat flour, rice, vegetable oil, milk and salt, to improve their nutritional content.

However, the majority of people are unaware of food fortification and its health benefits and it remains shrouded in myths and doubts.

The workshop clarified key issues surrounding food fortification. The standards for fortified foods have been gazette notified as of August 2, 2018 for wheat flour, maida and rice (with iron, folic acid and Vitamin B12), milk and edible vegetable oil (with Vitamins A and D) and double-fortified salt (with iodine and iron).

These standards have been created after careful deliberations of the scientific panel on nutrition and fortification, constituted with public health experts keeping in mind the balance between health benefits and toxicity levels of the added micronutrients.

They provide a range of the dosage, which aims at providing 30-50 per cent of the daily recommended dietary allowance (RDA) of the nutrients. The dosage of the premix used in the fortified staples is within safe limits and the focus is on ensuring the safety of the fortified food products rather than the source of the premix.

Chandigarh has voluntarily started rice fortification through its Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mid-day Meal (MDM) programmes, which cater to approximately one lakh beneficiaries.

Haryana has introduced fortified wheat flour in its ICDS and public distribution scheme (PDS)

programmes, and fortified vegetable oil in ICDS, MDM and PDS, voluntarily. Punjab is also geared up to introduce fortified foods in its safety net programmes.

A +F logo has been notified to identify fortified staples in the open market and their availability is gaining traction. At present, food fortification is voluntary, and it is akin to a three-legged race, in which fortification needs to be scaled up step-by-step before it becomes mandatory.

FSSAI recently kick-started a nationwide public awareness campaign called Eat Right India to usher in a new food culture with the right food and dietary choices among citizens.

The movement is a collective effort of FSSAI, the health department, local government bodies and development partners to nudge and empower citizens to improve their health and well-being.

It includes eating safe, eating healthy, encouraging the consumption of fortified foods and lowering that of foods high in fat, salt and sugar.