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'Tax foods high in fat, salt & sugar'

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CHENNAI: The Union health ministry should impose higher taxes on high-fat, high sugar and high salt food products, WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan has said. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) should also push to label high fat, sugar and salt content levels on the front of the package with "red-colour-coding" as per its plans despite objections and lobbying from the food industry, she said delivering the Dr C Gopalan Memorial Lecture on 'Double Trouble: Why Nutrition Policy Matters, More Than Ever Now', at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation here on Friday. Gopalan, who passed away last year, was former Director-General ICMR and Director of the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad.

FSSAI had proposed mandatory declaration of nutritional information such as calories, fat, sugar and sodium along with details of per serve percentage contribution to recommended dietary allowance on the front of the pack. "This will work like taxes and statutory warnings on tobacco products. When a consumer picks a pack that is red, they will know that the product is unhealthy. The industry is objecting to this but it has to be done," she said. "A hungry child can pick a pack of chips or fried snack for Rs5, while in most places a banana is more expensive," she said. That is one of the reasons why India continues to have stunted and wasted children while trying to stop lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart and kidney diseases. States such as Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Karnataka, which are facing the double burden, should work on health policies including expanding PDS basket beyond rice and wheat and getting more nutrition such as eggs, bio-fortified veggies and fruit into the children's noon-meal plate, besides imposing high tax on unhealthy food.

The results from the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) done across the country by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in collaboration with the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) are worrying. The survey points to up to 41% anaemia, 18% deficiencies in Vitamin A, 15% deficiency in Vitamin B12, and 24% deficiency in Vitamin D. It also showed that nearly 10% of children had pre-diabetes and an almost equal number of them had high triglycerides, about 4% had high cholesterol and 5% had hypertension. "Different states have different problems. So state policies must address the needs of people locally," she said.

Low birth weight - caused by factors including malnourished mothers - is also one of the highest risk factors for obesity and other lifestyle diseases, he said.

Type 2 diabetes, she said, which was commonly seen among adults is now increasing among children. "Until some years ago, children diagnosed with diabetes were largely type 1. Now, a quarter of children with diabetes have type 2," she said.

"We must look to the farms for nutrition, not pharmacies," she said quoting C Gopalan.