

New norms for supplementary food products for 2-3 year olds

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Image used for representational purpose only.

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NEW DELHI: India's food safety watchdog, for the first time, has notified nutritional guidelines for supplementary food products meant for children between 2-3 years.

So far, the Food Standards and Safety Regulatory Authority Of India had standards in place only for packaged baby food items meant for infants in the age-group of 6 months to 2 years.

Officials in the FSSAI said that while many multi-national giants are already selling food products for children up to 3 years, lack of guidelines meant that there was no minimum or maximum value fixed for nutritional and other components in the products.

"The new guidelines will mean that those who do not follow the guidelines can be treated as defaulters and penalised. This is something that was simply not there before," a senior FSSAI official told this newspaper.

The new guidelines stipulate maximum and minimum values of 29 components, including antioxidants, calcium, zinc, Vitamins, minerals, acidity regulators and added flavours, and also says that there will not be "Energy food" or "Health Food" written on these product packets.

Nutritional and baby food experts however raised concerns at the FSSAI move could help multi-national food giants in a big way and it was akin to giving them license to capture a big market.

"Children above two years can eat just like adults and actually do not need supplementary food products at all," said Arun Gupta of Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India and World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative.

"I suspect that the new guidelines will allow baby food manufacturer to circumvent the Infant Milk Substitute Act that prevents any promotion or advertising of supplementary food products in India and safeguards breastfeeding and feeding of homemade food to young children," he said.

A 2015 study by researchers at Indian Institute Of Public Administration had noted that while baby food sale is expanding very fast in India, in many commercial baby food products, the manufacturers add extra ingredients which affect the quality of the product.

"At best, these extra ingredients are nutritionally empty, and at worst, they are nutritionally dangerous, particularly when consumed by infants. For instance, many commercial baby foods, including organic brands, are high in sodium, sugar, or both," the study said.

Every calorie taken up through these ingredients is a lost opportunity for baby to eat a nutrient-rich food that will facilitate proper growth and development."