

Press Note

FSSAI concerned about fake videos and irresponsible reporting on food safety

New Delhi, Nov 27, 2018: Increased media coverage about food safety is a good development and new media, both electronic and social play a useful role in public outreach. However, in recent times, there have been many instances of circulation of false and malicious videos on various social media platforms regarding the safety and quality of food available in the country. Print and electronic media have also reported such news.

Expressing concern about this, CEO, FSSAI, Pawan Agarwal has said that, '*such news creates fear amongst public at large and erodes their confidence in the food control system in the country.*' He pointed out a few such instances including the false scare on issues of plastic eggs and plastic rice. More recently, a fake video had gone viral on social media related to the presence of melamine in milk, wherein it was maliciously projected that FSSAI had given permission for use of melamine in milk.' Facts on melamine in milk as FAQs have been posted on FSSAI website. It must be noted that use of melamine either as an ingredient or as an additive is not permitted in any food under the food safety regulations of the country, although maximum limits for presence of melamine in food, including milk, have been established under the regulations to address the incidental presence of melamine as a contaminant. This is as per international standards and is based on a proper risk assessment with respect to consumer health safety.

FSSAI also expresses concern about misinterpretation of recent interim report on the National Milk Quality Survey 2018. This was by far the most comprehensive survey on safety and quality of milk in the country. Over 6400 samples of raw and processed milk were tested for quality parameters (fat and solids-not-fat content), 12 adulterants and 4 contaminants (pesticides, antibiotics, aflatoxin M1 and ammonium sulphate) covering all States and UTs during May to October this year. The survey found that problem of milk adulteration was miniscule, even though a little less than 10% of the milk samples had contaminants that came from primary production causing some concerns about safety of milk. FSSAI is currently engaged in doing root cause analysis so that appropriate corrective and preventive action could be taken.

Contrary to the findings above, certain media reports interpreted the milk survey report wrongly and portrayed the milk in India as largely unsafe. Earlier this year, several newspapers reported of a WHO advisory that 'if adulteration of milk and milk products is not checked immediately, 87 per cent of citizens would be suffering from serious diseases like cancer by the year 2025 (in India)'. FSSAI had ascertained that no such advisory was issued by the WHO at all. It appears that the report first appeared in one newspaper, and later picked by other newspapers. FSSAI and/or WHO was not even approached for clarifications.

In this regard, CEO, FSSAI, Pawan Agarwal pointed out that '*such false propaganda is neither good for citizens nor for food businesses. This also erodes global trust in our food system and food businesses, and potentially has far reaching public health, social and trade implications*'. He further added that 'FSSAI would write to media houses and agencies to have internal checks so that reports on food safety are carefully verified.'



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FSSAI plans to hold a media workshop to build capacity in media on the technical aspects of reporting on food safety. On the issue of fake news and videos on social media platforms, FSSAI has already written to the Ministry of Electronics and IT so that a system for tracking of such messages could be put in place and perpetrators of such mischievous videos could be brought to book and penal action initiated against them.

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Melamine in milk: Important Facts

1. Is this video real?

The facts presented in the video are completely distorted, allegations are baseless and there appears to be a deliberate attempt to create scare among consumers of milk in India. The science behind presence of melamine in foods either has been deliberately ignored or is not at all known to the makers of this video.

Melamine has no known food uses. However, melamine and its structural analogues (ammeline, ammelide and cyanuric acid) can contaminate foods due to widespread use of melamine in plastics. Melamine is also a metabolite of the pesticide ‘cyromazine’, and is formed in the body of mammals, who ingest cyromazine contaminated feed, and also in plants which may lead to its ultimate presence in food from food producing animals and plants.

Apart from its incidental presence as a contaminant in foods as explained above, melamine could also enter food chain when used as an adulterant to falsely increase the protein content of such foods, such as milk.

2. Does FSSAI legally allows use of melamine in infant food and milk?

As explained above, melamine could be present in a food either on account of its incidental presence (as a contaminant) or due to deliberate addition (as an adulterant) for economic gains.

In order to address the issue of incidental presence of this melamine as a contaminant, FSSAI has specified maximum limits of melamine in foods, including infant foods and milk, which are in alignment with international standards and other countries’ regulations. It is also important to note that these limits are set on the basis of a proper risk assessment and considered to be safe from human health point of view (see Question 4 also).

Nevertheless, setting up of such limits certainly does not mean that FSSAI allow addition of melamine to foods even within the specified maximum limit. Therefore, it is totally baseless and incorrect to state that FSSAI allows use of melamine in infant food or milk.

3. Is melamine banned in other countries?

Melamine is a chemical compound that has a number of non-food industrial uses, including the production of laminates, glues, dinnerware, adhesives, moulding compounds, coatings and flame retardants.

There are no approved direct food uses for melamine. Under the Indian food regulations, any substance which is not approved as an ingredient or additive but is present in a food is considered to be either an adulterant or a contaminant. Melamine is not listed as an ingredient either in general or specifically in the standards of foods specified in the Indian food regulations. It can be categorically stated that use of melamine as an adulterant in any food is certainly not permitted in India and so is the case with other countries in the world as well. Many countries have, nevertheless, introduced limits for melamine in infant formula and other foods to address the issue of its incidental presence as a contaminant in foods.

4. What are Codex Standards? Why there is a need for FSSAI to allow limits for melamine?

In view of melamine being recognized as a contaminant, Codex has specified the following maximum limits for melamine in various foods:

- Food (other than infant formula) : 2.5 mg/kg
- Powdered infant formula : 1 mg/kg
- Liquid infant formula : 0.15 mg/kg

These limits have been specified after taking into consideration the outcome of the 'Joint FAO/WHO Expert meeting to review toxicological aspects of melamine and cyanuric acid' (1-4 December 2008; Ottawa, Canada) which established a tolerable daily intake (TDI) of 0.2 mg/kg body weight for melamine, applicable to the whole population including infants. The Expert Meeting also stated that development of a TDI does not mean that adulteration of food to a level consistent with the TDI is acceptable.

As per this Expert Meeting, limits for melamine in powdered infant formula (1 mg/kg) and in other foods (2.5 mg/kg) would provide a sufficient margin of safety for dietary exposure relative to the TDI. Accordingly, similar limits have been established in the regulations of several other countries. In India, this issue is still under examination at draft stage.

5. Can melamine be banned completely?

Non-food use of melamine is not within the domain of FSSAI and, therefore, we have no further comments on this. As far as food is concerned, and as already explained above, use of melamine either as an additive or as an ingredient is not permitted in any food under the Indian food regulations.

6. Additional information may be seen on the website provided below:

http://www.who.int/foodsafety/areas_work/chemical-risks/melamine/en/index1.html)