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Will the ban on junk food make kids seek healthier alternatives?

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It has become a norm for youngsters these days to munch on fast food while hanging out with their friends. Unlike in the past, the children now have more pocket money to buy food from outside and working parents, who are stifled for time to cook lunch for their children, also play a part in enabling these eating habits. The craving for processed food items among the youth has now resulted in an unhealthy and obese generation and recently forced the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to come out with regulations with respect to the diet of schoolchildren.

As part of Eat Right project, the nodal agency has banned the sale of food items high in fat, salt and sugar in school canteens, mess premises, hostel kitchens and within 50m radius of the school campus. As an additional measure to curb the consumption of junk food, FSSAI has also proposed to revise the menu of school cafes and day-care centres. Will the ban on junk food in schools persuade students to consume healthier alternatives?

Teachers and nutritionists share the opinion that the no-junk-food policy must be nurtured from home by parents. Thiruvananthapuram-based clinical dietician Mini Mary Prakash says that many parents want to see their kids put on weight. "They ask why should they ban their children from eating anything? This is the age to eat. But what they don't understand is that eating unhealthy food makes children obese and diabetic early. Young years are like a building's foundation. So, if it isn't strong enough, the whole building will collapse," says Mini.

Incidentally, she says that it's the parents who encourage their children to eat outside.

“Most parents complain that their children are obstinate about eating ice creams and other fast food items such as burger, pizza and deep-fried chips,” she says. “I believe parents should take the effort to divert their children’s eating habits to homemade products. For instance, instead of wraps, they could give chapathi rolls or brown bread sandwiches and fruit juices.”

As part of the new regulations, a team from Network of Professionals of Food and Nutrition, a FSSAI initiative, will visit schools to educate children and parents on the need to shift towards good eating habits, says Mini.

Many canteens in the State have already made plans to change their menu. Rajeev Menon, corporate chef of a leading educational institute in Kochi, says that the new regulation is a revolutionary change but it also has many economic implications.

Rajeev says that it’s the quality of the ingredients that turns certain snacks into junk. “In foreign countries, burgers, pizza, sandwiches, cheese, pasta, noodles and rolls are staple food. But when the burger is made of low quality flour and cheese with added flavours, it becomes unhealthy. Children require a minimum of 1,600 calories, and if prepared well, these food items can be healthy for them too. For instance, the maida dough in pizza can be replaced with multi-grain or wheat, and you can use less cheese and more veggies,” says the chef, adding that his institute is already following a healthy menu with salads, fruits and fresh juices, and has avoided packaged chips at their canteens.

Supporting Rajeev is Suja S, a kindergarten teacher of a school in Peyad, Thiruvananthapuram, that recently organised a programme called Healthy Go Wealthy, in keeping with the FSSAI’s Eat Right campaign. “We observed the day to encourage students to consume more fresh fruits and vegetables. Many parents still pack fresh fruits as snacks for children. In support of the regulation, we had also eliminated all kinds of packaged food items and other bottled juices from the canteen,” says the teacher.

Meanwhile, most of the parents hail the ban on junk food as a good initiative. Sumitha Sanjayan, an IT professional and mother of a 13-year-old, says that they give money to children to eat as they skip breakfast due to early morning tuition classes. “However, children only opt for burgers and pizzas as they think they are tastier. My daughter buys

these even from her school canteen. We can control their eating habits only when they are around us. But if they get these food items in their school canteen, they would surely crave for these,” says Sumitha, urging schools to promote naadan snacks such as kozhukatta, ada, unniyappam, vada and pazhampori along with tea and coffee.

Some students too are positive that they would opt for naadan snacks, if they are healthier. Class 11 student Amritha Sajeev, from a reputed ICSE school in Thiruvananthapuram, says, “I know many friends who skip lunch from home to eat junk food in our canteen. But if we get good bread toasts, less oily pazhampori, homemade cakes, cutlets, crispy vadas and bondas, then we have no other option to go for such items.”

On how healthy naadan snacks are as compared to the junk food items mentioned by FSSAI, Mini says, “Anything deep fried using the oil repeatedly is not healthy. Even in our homes, if we cook using the same oil in which we prepared 10 vadas the previous day, it will contain chemicals. Also, it is good to opt for coconut oil than sunflower and corn oil as the latter results in transfat in people. So, the best alternatives to junk food would be boiled sweet potatoes, boiled bananas, yams, ada and kozhukatta.”