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Your food choice at office can impact your health, but some menus changing for better

Shobita Dhar | Sep 28, 2019

New Delhi: At the Bengaluru office of Visa, employees get to read the calorie count of every meal available in their cafeteria. One cup of mutton biryani is 320 calories. If you add a gulab jamun, your total count is up by 150 calories. The cafeteria also practises portion control, uses less salt and offers healthy alternatives such as brown rice and multigrain chapattis. “We can choose anything we want to eat but our office informs us about our food choice,” says an employee who makes sure her lunch calorie count never goes over 500. Employees at Myntra offices in Bengaluru and Gurugram are equally spoiled for choice when it comes to healthy fare — salads, juices, calorie-counted meals and curries prepared with less salt and oil. “We are extremely conscious about the health and well-being of our employees. We have partnered with external vendors to provide healthy, protein-rich, low-calorie but high on energy wholesome meals throughout the day,” says Abhishek Sen, senior vice president and head of human resources, Myntra.

With growing awareness about healthy eating and increasing burden of lifestyle diseases, offices across India are making conscious efforts to offer healthy food options to their employees. For example, the traditional meeting menu – chips, biscuits and tea – is giving way to healthier options. In June this year the ministry of health and family welfare ordered a ban on serving biscuits and tea during official and departmental meetings and instead introduced roasted channa, walnuts, almonds and dates.

An Assocham report on ‘Preventive Healthcare and its impact on Corporate Sector’ states that Re1 spent on prevention saves Rs 133 in absenteeism costs and Rs 6.62 in healthcare costs. And yet most workplaces in India – with the exception of some MNCs and government departments -- continue to put food at the bottom of their list of priorities.

Employees end up consuming high-sodium and high-sugar foods while sitting at their desks for long durations of time and coping with work stress.

“Most office foods are rich in maida, sugar, trans fats and toxic fats (refined oils and margarines). These foods are often laced with artificial flavours and colours. Healthier options such as vegetables, salad, fruits, whole grains and healthy fats are sadly missing from the menu. Typically, tenders are floated and the cheapest vendor (obviously, using the cheapest raw materials) is given the contract. People consuming such foods are prone to developing digestive disorders, nutritional deficiencies, mood disorders, hormonal imbalances (PCOD) high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and autoimmune disorders (thyroid, arthritis etc),” says nutritionist Ishi Khosla whose new book deals with the problem of unhealthy office food.

“During my practice I realised that people would have trouble following dietary routines because of their work situations. I also learnt that different advice is needed for navigating unique issues like timing and lack of availability of healthy foods. Also different occupations have different nutritional demands,” Khosla adds.

To gradually change this trend, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) started an ‘Eat Right at Office’ campaign last year that aims at creating Eat Right Campuses in institutions and public and corporate workplaces. “We are encouraging workplaces to give employees access to healthy food such as seasonal and local fruits and vegetables and fortified grains and limit re-heating of oil and intake of aerated drinks. And to remove biscuits, namkeen and chips from meetings,” says an FSSAI spokesperson. So far, seven campuses, including IIT Gandhinagar, have earned the ‘Eat Right Campus’ tag. FSSAI aims to have 100 such campuses by the end of next year. The authority is also in talks with Bollywood production houses to introduce healthy food for crew on film sets.