

Labels of truth

23 Aug 2019 [Diya Kohli](#)

- FSSAI's new draft regulations on packaged food labels could change the way we shop for food
- These will make it mandatory to display colour coding on packaged foods with high-fat, high-sugar and high-fat content

It is a battle between conscience and desire as supermarket shelves tempt shoppers with their selection of sweet-salty-deep-fried sins. To buy that oversized bag of sour cream and onion chips, or to flip it around and read its nutritional information, is the big question. And then the others follow. How much sugar does your breakfast muesli pack in? Is 15g of sugar per 100ml of fruit juice good for you?

Shopping is the first step towards eating healthy and it all starts with reading nutritional labels—information that was often missing from packaged fried snacks or namkeens, especially from the unorganized sector. Now, the [Food Safety and Standards Authority of India \(FSSAI\)](#) is paving the way to make labels reveal exactly what goes into your food.

For food writer Priyadarshini Chatterjee, reading labels has changed the way she shops. "Every nutritionist I have spoken to advised against packaged food, even ones that come with tempting tags like low fat or zero sugar, because often these items might use substitutes that are far worse. For me, the 'low-fat' tag was once a major lure. However, ever since I started reading the entire label, I have tried to make better choices and sometimes the better choice has been the regular stuff," she says.

Nutritional information on Indian packaged foods became mandatory in 2006, after Parliament passed the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA) and set up the authority, which formulates standards and regulates manufacture, storage and distribution. Over the last decade, notifications under the FSSA have tried to make communication between manufacturers and consumers more transparent. These have, to some extent, helped curb fraudulent labelling practices and misrepresentation by brands. Many companies have come

under the scanner for their claims, the most recent case being that of Baba Ramdev's company Patanjali, which received a notice from the US food and drug administration (FDA) for differential labelling on its sherbets. The Indian labels carried more information on medicinal and dietary benefits than the American bottles.

Last year, the FSSAI drew up a draft regulation that would make it mandatory to display red colour coding on labels of packaged products that have high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt content. In the pre-draft stage, it took the advice of an expert panel as well as feedback from the food processing industry. It released the draft regulation in June.

"The idea behind the new labelling regulations is to enable citizens to know more about the composition of food products so that they can make informed choices," the FSSAI said in a statement on 25 June. It also plans to replace the existing vegetarian logo with a green triangle and devise new symbols for allergens.

Once the regulations are finalized, the FSSAI hopes to implement them over three years and bring smaller manufacturers within the purview. Perhaps a prominent display of saturated fats, trans fats, sugar and sodium contained per serving of packaged snacks will make many reach for carrot sticks instead.

The medical fraternity hopes the average customer will become more sensitive to misleading claims. "Sugar, salt and fat requirements differ for different consumers. Having said that, the colour coding as per FSSAI guidelines will go a long way in creating awareness among discerning consumers who are interested in maintaining good health," says Mumbai-based clinical nutritionist Charmaine D'Souza. She believes information on additives and artificial sweeteners would help consumers choose the right foods rather than blindly follow marketing catchphrases.

While the new labels may end up being a study in ciphers, reading the fine print could help you make healthier choices.