

All about HFSS Foods, Hypertension & Food Labelling

By Richa Pande

The excess intake of these nutrients has been driven largely by the widespread availability, affordability, and promotion of related food items. Regular and excess consumption of HFSS foods not just lead to high blood pressure but also obesity, a risk factor for hypertension. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to reduce the consumption of HFSS foods in our daily diet. HFSS foods are precisely defined by FSSAI as foods that contain high levels of total fat AND/OR saturated fat AND/OR trans-fat AND/OR added sugar AND/OR salt.

Consumption patterns of HFSS Foods

A relevant research conducted by the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, in 2019, in rural, urban, and tribal areas revealed the consumption patterns of HFSS Foods and found a high intake of these foods in the mentioned areas. **The research also revealed that every fourth person in rural areas, every fifth person in tribal areas and every third person in the urban areas is suffering from hypertension.** Many public health experts have expressed concerns about the high consumption of HFSS foods in India amongst children as well as adults. Moreover, a practicing nutritionist stressed that excess consumption of these nutrients is an open invitation to non-communicable diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart ailments, and even cancer.

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This brings us to the labelling and revelations on the packaged food product. Do you know that a single Rs.10 bag of chips weighing about 30-gms of saturated fat nourishes you with half the amount of fats and sodium that you should be having in a day? And you certainly don't stop at 30-gms. Most of the multigrain snacks in the market are generally made using palm oil which is bad for the heart (the nutrient value of the food grain contents notwithstanding), as palm oil is high in saturated fats. Even snacks made in healthier oils can contain exceedingly high amounts of sugar or sodium. But how do we realise which snack is high or low in either of these? We must be knowledgeable enough to choose foods that are appropriate for our health- here a suitable food label comes to the rescue.

Critical measures in hand

Food-based dietary guidelines and the nutrition information table on the back of food packaging (BoP) have long been implemented, which are in fact informative but for most of us, they are too complicated and cannot be easily comprehended. The idea to simplify the informative nutrition table on BoPL led to the concept of the front of pack labelling (FoPL) that emphasizes on nutrients for concern i.e. energy, fat, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar. FoPLs shall also be more

visible and easier for consumers to understand and use. Generally, two types of FoPLs are found on food products globally, viz., nutrient-specific and the summary type.

The nutrient-specific type indicates only certain nutrients selected from the BoP label with and without guidance on their health impact. The guidance is based on the nutrient contents per 100-gm or mL and could be shown simply as in a traffic light pattern. From the guideline, food products can then be classified as low, potential, or high risk for NCDs on account of a particular nutrient, based on the traffic light colour. However, FoPL indicators can also be more directive, that is, it can be either a positive or negative signal. The positive approach “summary-type” FoPL is one such example that summarises the healthy aspects of the nutrients. On the contrary, the negative-approach summary-type FoPL highlights the undesirable nutrients in a product as a warning tool for consumers. This communicates whether a food product contains excessive amounts of undesirable nutrients, which must be labelled with a warning sign or message on FoPL. This approach has been implemented in some Latin American countries. Without additional nutrition information, however, these summary type-FoPLs may not be informative enough to educate consumers.

In India, FoPL on packaged foods was proposed by FSSAI based on an expert committee constituted by the FSSAI. It proposed a single light FOPL (marked red & white’ red= nutrient of concern present in the food item above the recommended cut-off set for that specific nutrient by the food authority). However, as per some news reports, FSSAI de-linked itself from the proposed FOPL in December 2019.

Ideal RDA to stay healthy

- The WHO has recommended the RDA as under:
- Total fat < 65 g /day, (20 - 35 % of calorie consumption viz. 2000 cal)
- Trans fat ≤ 02 g / day, (1 % of calorie consumption)
- Sugar ≤ 25 g / day, (100 cal for women and 150 cal for men)
- Salt ≤ 05 g / day, (2.4 g sodium; 2 – 3 g only for children)

Decoding the above, we see that the sugar consumption limit recommendation is not more than 20-25 gm per day per person. The fat consumption should not be more than 65 gm/day. When we compare these limits with the salt, sugar, and fat contents of the packaged foods available in the market, we would be surprised to find that a small pack would account for more than half of our daily requirements.

Therefore, it is important to go through the information on food packs before picking it up. Here are few tips for consumers that can enable them to make informed food choices (using the current labelling format)-

- If you see palm oil as an ingredient on the food pack, avoid buying it as palm oil contains relatively more amounts of saturated fats than many other vegetable oils.

- Be sure to check the nutrients of concern i.e. fat, sugar, salt/sodium and energy levels of the food packs you choose. Also, keep in mind the daily recommended amounts of these nutrients. On some food packs, one can also find information on the daily recommended value for a nutrient next to the nutrient content column. One can also use them to make an informed food choice.

To sum up, a line to say is- it is always safe than to be sorry. Read your food labels first, check if that is matching your health standards and then go ahead enjoy your pack. Happy eating!