

mint primer

How safe is the food on your child's plate?

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Prominent brands are under the scanner for selling sugary infant food, chicken fed with antibiotics, and spices peppered with cancer-causing chemicals. Naturally, experts are concerned about lax regulations. *Mint* reviews the safety and quality of our packaged food:



1 Why are some big brands in the news?

Last week, Swiss watchdog Public Eye said Nestle adds excess sugar to its infant milk and cereal products sold in low- and middle-income countries, including India, but not in developed markets. Nestle said that over the years, it has cut 'added sugar' in products sold in India. In another instance, four spice mixes sold by MDH and Everest were red-flagged by regulators in Hong Kong and Singapore, due to presence of ethylene oxide—a carcinogenic food fumigant. Finally, Venky's, a poultry brand, was found pushing antibiotics to enhance poultry production, which causes drug resistance in humans.

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2 What steps did the regulator take?

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is probing two cases—infant products and spices. It is collecting samples from manufacturing units across India which will be tested by labs. For infant products, FSSAI will test multiple brands to check if they violate local laws. Earlier in April, the commerce and industry ministry advised e-commerce firms to remove the 'health drinks' tag from popular products, citing lack of standards and definition under domestic food laws. In April last year, a controversy erupted after Bournvita, a drink marketed to children, was found to contain excess sugar.

3 What does this mean for consumers?

Food companies often mislabel packaged food, so consumers think they are healthy. Tags like 'natural,' 'healthy' and 'pure' are used to drive sales. Buyers may think fruit juices are healthier than carbonated beverages, but they often have same or even higher levels of sugar. Deceptive marketing adds to India's growing burden of diabetes and child obesity.

4 What do health experts have to say?

According to Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPI), a think tank, India needs strict regulations to control marketing of junk food to children, easy-to-understand labels on packaged food and ban celebrity endorsement of ultra-processed food like biscuits and cereal-based 'health drinks.' FSSAI is yet to mandate front-of-pack labels which alert buyers on high levels of salt, sugar and fat. Energy-dense ultra processed food is designed to be addictive, which pushes people to eat more and gain weight, studies show.

5 What about non-packaged food?

Same story. Exports of premium rice from India have come under the scanner in Europe for high pesticide residues. Consumers in India are not aware of chemical residues in grains and pulses they eat daily—because most products go untested and escape scrutiny. The problem is particularly severe for perishable produce like green chili, brinjal, okra and out-of-season vegetables where farmers tend to use chemical pesticides indiscriminately. It is safer to switch to certified organic food, now available at reasonable prices.