

WILL QR CODES IMPROVE ACCESS TO FOOD LABELS?

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The story so far: The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has [recommended the inclusion of a QR \(quick response\) code on food products](#) for accessibility by visually impaired individuals stating that this will ensure access to safe food for all.

The move is vital as India is one of the largest markets of packaged foods in the world and is currently witnessing a growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) which have seen an abrupt rise globally since the last two decades, according to the World Health Organization. Besides other factors, this trend is attributed to aggressively marketed, cheaper, and more easily available pre-packaged foods which is finding a growing preference among consumers. Every consumer has the right to know exactly what he is paying for and if he is getting what he is promised and advertised, says Ashim Sanyal, CEO and secretary of Consumer VOICE, a non-government organisation working in the field of consumer awareness and education. "With this new initiative an informed choice will be offered to consumers," he adds, pointing out that the move should be backed by also identifying unhealthy foods. "The FSSAI should get the sequence right for labelling and QR code for visually impaired should be part of a mandate for front-of-pack labelling (FOPL) warning labels," he says.

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The FSSAI has advised that these new QR codes should encompass comprehensive details about the product, including, but not limited to, ingredients, nutritional information, allergens, manufacturing date, best before/expiry/use by date, allergen warning, and contact information for customer enquiries. It adds that the inclusion of a QR code for the accessibility of information does not replace or negate the requirement to provide mandatory information on the product label, as prescribed by relevant regulations.

The latest advisory caters to two important regulations — the FSSAI's Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020 which outlines the information to be included on labels of food products and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 which recognises the rights of individuals with disabilities and emphasises accessibility of health for persons with disabilities.

A QR code is a type of two-dimensional matrix barcode, invented in 1994, by the Japanese company Denso Wave for labelling automobile parts. According to market experts, for the food

manufacturers, using QR codes on food products can help improve their brand image, customer loyalty, and operational efficiency.

On the importance of accurate and accessible food labels, a recently published paper titled, 'Food literacy & food labelling laws—a legal analysis of India's food policy', noted that aggressively marketed, cheaper and more easily available pre-packaged foods, often considered as foods high in fat, salt, and sugar, is finding a growing preference amongst consumers in India. "To prevent or control further widespread of NCDs, the FSSAI has issued numerous food and packaging laws and acts to control their manufacture, storage, distribution, sale, and import so that a safe and wholesome food is available to consumers. The front-of-pack labelling (FOPL), proposed by FSSAI in 2019, is a key strategy to alert and educate consumers in making an informed choice," notes the lead author of the paper, Om Prakash Bera, country coordinator, Global Health Advocacy Incubator, India. Food industry experts also note that consumers now consider food packaging equally important as a product. "The increase in smartphone usage by consumers indicate that QR codes are emerging as one of the most promising technologies to enhance the information provided to consumers and influence their buying behaviour," they note.

The U.S., India, France and the U.K. are among the top users of QR code, according to reports. A research paper done on 'Evaluating the Use of QR Codes on Food Products' noted that the size of the global packaged food market is estimated at \$303.26 billion in 2019, with a compound annual growth rate of 5.2% over this period. According to the results of a survey, 'QR Code Statistics 2022, the Latest Numbers and Use-Cases on Global Usage', 57% scanned a food QR code to get specific information about the product, 38.99% of respondents want to see QR codes used more and 67% of the respondents agreed that these codes make life easier.

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