

# PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCATES DEMAND WARNING LABELS, BAN ON JUNK FOOD ADS

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Public health experts, consumer groups, lawyers, and patient groups on September 22 called on the Union government to check the rise in consumption of high fat, sugar, salt, and ultra-processed foods (UPF), warning that if the trend goes unchecked, India will not be able to halt the rise of obesity and diabetes.

New data obtained through the [Poshan tracker revealed that 43 lakh children under the age of five years](#) — or 6% of all children tracked — are obese or overweight, notes Arun Gupta, convenor of the think tank Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi). He says one of the major underlying factors behind the increasing consumption of junk foods is triggered by the food industry's pervasive advertising and promotional techniques to increase sales. NAPi recently released a report on the issue, titled, "The Junk Push: Rising Consumption of Ultra-processed foods in India-Policy, Politics and Reality".

"Existing regulatory policies remain ineffective to minimise any advertisements of junk foods, which are mostly misleading and especially directed at children and adolescents. None of the legal frameworks or guidelines in India have the potential to stop most of the misleading advertisements of pre-packaged junk or foods high in fats, salt and sugar or to ban misleading claims or warn people about the risks to health. The intent that there shall be no 'misleading advertisement' needs a clearly worded law," added Dr. Gupta.

In an effort to tackle the burden of non-communicable diseases, the Union government put in place a National Multisectoral Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Common NCDs (2017-22).

"However, gaps remain. Its recommendations such as preventive legal frameworks to control advertising and labelling are yet to be acted upon to cut down the consumption of junk foods," said the NAPi report.

The report says that, of the advertisements it examined, none provided the "most important information" as demanded by the Consumer Protection Act 2019, for a food product: the amount of sugar, salt, or saturated fat it contains.

Environmental activist Vandana Shiva said that the burden of non-communicable chronic diseases is related primarily to junk and ultra-processed foods, and is fast becoming a health emergency. Protecting and promoting healthy, diverse food and regulating ultra-processed food is the duty of government, she added.

“As per an unpublished WHO India study, more than 200,000 such advertisements [for pre-packaged foods] are flashed each month just on 10 select channels,” said social scientist Nupur Bidla, a member of NAPI. “These advertisements target children, seek parental approval, use celebrities, project junk foods as healthy. It is because of such pervasive and aggressive marketing techniques, we call it as ‘The Junk Push’,” she said.

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