

EDITORIAL

SUGAR: IT'S ALL ABOUT HEALTH

Sugar is an important part of a diet. Sweetness is one of the five “basic tastes” detected by sensory receptors in the oral cavity. Sugar is an important part of a diet. In fact sugar is the preferred source of the body’s fuel for brain power, muscle energy and every natural process that goes on in every functioning cell. According to Ayurved, in summer, sweets should be a part of your diet as it keeps the body cool. With only 15 calories per teaspoon, sugar is no more fattening than any other 15 calories. Like all carbohydrates, the body converts sugar into fuel quickly, unlike say fats, on the other hand, are stored in fat cells to be used later. India is one of the oldest producers of sugar in the world.

India is still a developing nation where a large population is still below the poverty line and an inexpensive source of energy, for most of these people, continues to be sugar. Sugar requirements in a body vary from person to person depending on age, weight, body disposition, lifestyle, medical prognosis, activity level, climate and region. These days it has become a statement to make sugar the villain & basis for some diseases. What was once celebrated across cultures is now seen as a leading impediment to human health.

Indian food regulator Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is proposing to bring out a regulation in an effort to control sugar consumption, suggesting that a red colored mark should be put on the packs of products to highlight high fat, salt and sugar content, where the energy from added sugar is more than 10% of the total energy provided by 100 gms/100 ml of the product.

While it has been understood that the idea behind these labeling regulations of FSSAI is to enable citizens to understand better about the composition of food products so that they can make informed choices, there are serious concerns about the threshold being set as per global levels which may not be relevant to the Indian dietary

requirements. This decision of FSSAI is not supported by any study/research in the Indian context.

ICMR Dietary guidelines are said to be one of the basis for the said FSSAI color coded guidelines. In the report of ICMR, there is no threshold for added sugars or any study mentioned which could suggest that beyond 10% of the energy/Kcal coming from added sugars in a food pack is harmful or detrimental for an individual. Therefore, the thresholds prescribed in the labeling regulations seem to be based on WHO guidelines.

It is important to note that the per capita consumption of sugar in India continues to be amongst the lowest in the world at just 19 kilos of sugar per person per year. The per capita consumption of most of the developed countries in the world like USA, Australia, Canada, Russia, UK, Germany etc. have a per capita consumption around 50 kilos per person per year. The current per capita consumption in India continues to remain flat/stable during the last couple of decades, despite the substantial increase in income levels in the country. It may be pertinent to note that if per capita consumption of sugar is static in last several years, obesity and diabetes have increased in India; therefore the reasons for that increase cannot be attributed to sugar. There are other reasons and causes, which can be confirmed and known if there are proper and authentic studies in Indian context.

It is high time that some studies or research is conducted in the Indian context specific to the Indian culture and economy especially considering that still a large percentage of population still live under poverty line and sugar is treated as a cheap source of energy for them. Picking up something which can be at best important in another country, where the consumption of a particular food item is much higher than in India, is not only misleading but also damaging for the ordinary citizens. It would make us to start believing that reducing consumption of a particular food item, which correctly speaking is already much below the world average, will keep us away from diseases, whereas the solution to our health problems would lie elsewhere, like lifestyle issues, physical activities etc. It may result in lower intake of a food item which is already on a lower side in India, which can do us more harm than good.

Demonizing sugar would impact a whole generation if the FSSAI goes ahead with its proposal without understanding the impact it will have on the people. This would also

result in a misinformed choice to cut down on a key nutrient that serves as a fuel to the body. The requirement for each individual is also different, depending on their daily routine, and standard requirement cannot be advised. The top examples for this would be sportsmen, whose energy requirements are drastically higher and they depend on energy drinks to meet the need.

There has to be awareness generated on balanced diet along with emphasis on exercise for a healthy body. It can be safely concluded that, “Sugar –Yes or No” is not important but quantity, calories (irrespective from which source) and active or sedentary lifestyle plays a vital role in overall well being of an individual.