

Junking Junk Food: RSTV – Big Picture



Rajya Sabha TV programs like 'The Big Picture', 'In Depth' and 'India's World' are informative programs that are important for UPSC preparation. In this article, you can read about the discussions held in the 'Big Picture' episode on "Junking Junk Food" for the [IAS exam](#).

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Context:

Draft regulations have been released by the FSSAI (The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) known as the **Food Safety and Standards (Safe food and healthy diets for school children) Regulation, 2019**. This has been drafted to ensure that children acclimatize and adapt healthy eating as a part of their daily habit.

What is Junk Food?

- There are several definitions as to what is junk food, however, there isn't one definitive definition of what entitles the classification of a food into the junk food category.
- Generally, a food is classified as junk if it doesn't offer any or has very little nutritional benefits and is generally high in sugar or fat. The junk foods are also observed to be very low in fibre and very high in calories.
- Olivier De Schutter, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur, had commented as to how the issue of junk food or unhealthy diets are now a major threat to the world's health. It is even more problematic as the world is currently obsessed with junk food, which makes it an even more serious threat than tobacco.
- Junk foods are also high in their salt content, which upon regular consumption can have debilitating effects on an individual's health.

Adverse Effects of Junk Food on Human Health

Food has been labelled as junk if it offers no significant nutrients to the body.

- Regular consumption of such food will deprive the body of essential nutrients such as minerals, vitamins, healthy fats, and protein.
- Their regular consumption will have debilitating effects on the physical and mental health during the long run.
- Most of the junk foods are highly processed, which indicates that they're high in sugar, salt and fat. This results in a higher risk of obesity.
- The side-effects of eating junk food are all interlinked. Regular consumption results in the unhealthy fat getting deposited, leading to plaque build-up, while consecutively lowering the metabolism of the

body. This, thus lowers the rate of breakdown of fat by the body, leading to obesity and cardiovascular diseases.

- The high salt content present as a preservative and stabilizer in most of the junk food causes an increase in blood pressure, resulting in high blood pressure and can even cause strokes. High blood pressure places a lot of stress on the heart resulting in heart problems and making consumers susceptible to hypertension too.
- The additional salt in the blood would result in a shift of the water from the cells to the body fluid, which often causes a buildup of fluid in the brain thereby causing seizures. The junk foods have also been found to have adverse effects on the cognitive development in children thereby not letting them develop to their fullest potential.
- Most of the junk foods have been found to contain carcinogens, which can potentially cause cancer.
- Conditions such as obesity result in the individual developing psychological issues such as depression and social stigma, which result in a loss of self-confidence.

Laws for Junk Food Regulation:

The main reason behind the boom of junk food across the world is globalization. Although there is no specific mention of junk foods in the laws, there are certain laws which govern the safety of food products for consumption such as:

- **Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954** - Ensures prevention of adulteration of food products.
- **Food Safety and Standards (FSS) Act, 2006** - Formulates the regulations regarding the standards and guidelines with respect to the food and the systems to enforce the standards given.
- **Fruit Products Order, 1955** - To ensure maintenance of sanitary and hygienic conditions during the manufacturing of fruit and vegetable products.
- **Vegetable Oil Products (Control) Order, 1947** - Vegetable Oil Products (Control) Order, 1947 along with Vegetable Oil Products (Standards of Quality) Order, 1975 have been replaced by a single Order called "**Vegetable Oil Products (Regulation) Order, 1998.**"
 - It holds the responsibility to lay the standards for the oil products' quality during the manufacturing process.
 - The Directorate of Vanaspati, Vegetable Oils and Fats holds the responsibility for implementation of the standards of quality of the vegetable oil product.
- **Meat Food Products Order, 1973** - Lays the limit for the heavy metals, insecticides residues, preservatives, and hormones present in the meat products. It also enlists the sanitary standards for the various meat products and is propagated by the provisions of the **Essential Commodities Act, 1955.**
- **Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011** - Requires the labelling of every ingredient which is responsible for characterising the food product, and is expected to be present in the food product by the customer, whose omission could be considered as deceit of the customers.

What is FSSAI?

- FSSAI or the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, is a sovereign body established by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India.
- It was established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. This act is an amalgamation of the food regulations and safety rules of India.
- It is responsible for the promotion and protection of the public's health through careful and systematic supervision of the food safety and regulations.
- It is also responsible for formulating science-backed standards of food products and maintaining a check on the production, storage, and distribution of food products to ensure the public has access to nutritious, wholesome and safe food.
- It is mandatory to obtain the license issued by FSSAI for the individuals who would or want to be involved in the food business operations. This license is an assurance of the quality and safety of marketed or sold food products to the public.

FSSAI Draft for Junk Food

The FSSAI has drafted a set of regulations concerning the sale of junk food in the school premises and 50 mtrs near the school campuses with an aim to change the school campuses into 'eat right school campuses' which promote healthy eating. It aims at providing children wholesome, safe and nutritious food at schools.

Objectives of the FSSAI Draft:

- **Eat Right Schools:** Schools will be prohibited from selling junk food or foods high in sugar, fat or salt in school messes, kitchens and in the hostel messes. The idea is to convert all schools campuses into eat right campuses which promote eating a balanced, nutritious meal and emphasizes on the food wastage also.
- **Marketing and Sales of Unhealthy Food Banned:** Foods high in fat, sugar or salt cannot be sold by vendors within 50mtrs from a school campus, in an aim to shield the children from false advertising of the companies.
- **Prohibition of Branding:** To impede food companies manufacturing such products from targeting children, the companies have been banned from using their logos or product names and images as advertisement on any books or educational material and even from educational buildings and structures.
- **Food Products Recommendation:** The draft has a set of guidelines regarding the foods which can be provided in the schools.
- **Safety and Standards Regulations:** All of the vendors dealing with manufacturing or selling of food products in or around 50 mtrs of a school campus must be registered under the FSS Act (under Schedule 4) which means they have to follow hygienic and safe practises to prepare, store and handle food.
- **Regular inspection** in schools will be done on a periodic basis to keep a check on the quality and safety of food served in schools. A sub-committee has also been recommended by the state-level advisory committee to ensure effective implementation and to keep a check on all of the guidelines being enforced on schools.

Need for the Draft:

- **Case Studies:** A very important government survey was released recently. It was conducted in collaboration with UNICEF, which revealed dangerous results about the health of Indian students. The study included a huge sample.
 - The findings showed that 10% of all Indian school students surveyed were found to be prediabetic and all risk factors of NCD (Non Communicable Disease) were found. They had high triglycerides, high predisposition to hypertension, and all risk factors for chronic kidney diseases. This indicates that on growing up, these children would not be healthy individuals.
- **Court Orders:** The Delhi High Court, in 2015, had mandated all the central agencies to formulate a plan to promote healthy balanced diets for school students. The Modi government also gives a lot of importance to eating right.
- **Metabolic Diseases:** Western diets have found to change the entire gut microflora which has a huge negative impact on the health of an individual, setting them up for metabolic diseases in the future. There are sufficient studies which have reiterated the importance of gut bacteria flora for the maintenance of good health and the positive influence of the Indian diet in the growth and maintenance of a healthy gut microflora.

Target Group of the Draft:

- The targeted group are the children who can be easily influenced and when such practices are inculcated as a habit from a young age they tend to follow healthy eating as a lifestyle.
- Eat right schools basically believes that nutrition is not just taught through textbooks but students are made to realize through extracurriculars, and through practical experience, about balanced diet which includes what is seasonal/local, what is personal hygiene, what is nutritious and how to ensure the premises of schools are clean.

Problems in Implementation:

- **Violation of the Norm:** Most often than not, the laws made are not strictly enforced and are violated after sometime.
- **Complete Ban on Junk Food:** A complete ban on the marketing of such foods will take time. The companies manufacturing junk foods also are targeting kids, who are gullible and make an easy target.
- **Collaboration of Schools and Parents:** The schools and parents will both have to contribute equally to the cause as one sided efforts will not yield any results. Parents also have to insist on the importance of a healthy diet at home while the school works on a healthy diet plan and prevention of sales of unhealthy food near its campus.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Most of the times, even if the parents are educated, they are not particularly aware of the intricates of the nutritional aspects and requirements on a daily basis.
- **Favourability:** Students favour junk food due to the added flavours, and these foods are addictive.
- **Lack of a Nutritionist in Schools:** There is usually no nutritionist involved in the school premises for educating the parents and to keep track of the general health of the students.
- **Lack of Connection:** The students have no real connection and have no knowledge about horticulture which results in them viewing the entire idea of nutrition as a foreign topic and having to be forced upon the idea of nutrition.

Way Forward:

- **Strict Enforcement:**
 - The biggest challenge of this guideline will be implementation, but the government has proven in the past as in the case of Nestle Maggi case that if they are using the power of the law, they can bring the global multinational corporations down to knees.
 - FSSAI has to ensure that the structure of the law has to be such that there is no escape routes for anyone.
 - Ban on the marketing of such unhealthy foods to the kids.
- **Awareness Campaigns:**
 - Awareness workshops will have to be conducted for parents to help them understand the need and importance of a healthy balanced diet in children.
 - These guidelines have to be viewed in the holistic context where we have empirical evidence if we don't avoid high fat/salt/sugar foods now, children will be suffering and would be exposed to dangers of health.
 - The students will also have to be made aware of the importance of a nutritious wholesome and balanced meals as a part of a healthy lifestyle. They will also need to be educated about the food wastage and hygienic practises.
 - There needs to be development of innovative measures like community breakfast and lunch, where there is active participation of teachers and Principal with the students on a periodic basis and educating them about what is good food.
- **Getting Professional Help:**
 - A professional nutritionist should be hired to help prepare balanced meal plans for schools.
 - The National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad has drafted a document. This document is for adaptation by school managements in the country and go by with, in case they do not have much knowledge on the topic.

Conclusion:

- Growing up on junk food will lead to improper cognitive development in children, and result in lack of well rounded intelligent individuals which is very important for a country like India which is banking on their demographic dividend for development.
- Therefore the focus of the entire draft is to ensure a healthy future for the children as their health is of primary concern.