

FOPL: Why Health Star Rating Label is not Suitable for India?

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Insertion of simplified nutrition information on the front of food packages is a cost effective strategy to guide consumers to make healthier choices and discourage them from consuming foods that are high in salt, sugar, fat (HFSS) the critical nutrients causing rise in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). In short, it is a tool that aids consumers in improving their diets. It helps them make an informed decision.

In India, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is now considering implementing mandatory Front-of-Pack Labelling (FoPL) and is already conducting stakeholder consultations in this regard. We believe a regulation in this regard will form a major stepping stone for India to target HFSS in packaged food products, which is the main cause for the increasing number of NCDs in the country. Consumers will get an opportunity to select and choose healthy products based on front-of-package information about the amount of Salt, Sugar and Saturated Fats. However, some are showing a preference to opt for Health Star Rating (HSR) Label without carrying forward any background study of its effectiveness and suitability for a country like India, that has a huge number of poor, illiterate and vulnerable populations.

To help consumers make healthier choices, Australia and New Zealand had introduced the voluntary HSR system in 2014. But recent studies shows that the system is highly flawed as unhealthy products are still able to get a high score. This is because the rating is based on the overall nutritional value, and the inclusion of healthy ingredients (i.e. fibre, protein and vitamins) cancel out the unhealthy ingredients (i.e. sugar, saturated fats and salt). More importantly, the system does not effectively assist the vulnerable consumers who need it the most. While HSR does help some middle- to high-income consumers, it does a poor job with respect to consumers of low socio-economic status. This suggests that the label requires consumers to be educated about its meaning.

Given this, the webinar would be an opportunity for all of us to listen to experts on the topic, share our own experiences and lessons learnt, discuss challenges, and propose alternative solutions and an effective label that would be more suitable for our country and our consumers.

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