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Mindful Dining: The Role of Menu Labelling in Promoting Healthy Eating in India

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In India, dining out has become a popular part of modern life. People enjoy eating at restaurants, ordering food online, or grabbing a quick meal from fast food outlets. However, many consumers are unaware of the calories and nutrients in their food. This lack of information can lead to unhealthy eating habits and health issues like obesity. To help consumers make better choices, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has made menu labelling mandatory under the Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) First Amendment Regulations, 2020. This regulation aims to promote healthier eating habits and transparency in the food service industry.

Menu labelling is the practice of displaying calorie counts and nutritional details of food items on menu cards, boards, digital platforms, and advertisements. This helps customers make healthier choices based on the calorie and nutrient content of the food. It also allows them to select portion sizes that match their dietary needs and identify potential allergens before ordering. By providing this information, menu labelling reduces the risk of obesity and lifestyle diseases like diabetes and heart problems. Additionally, it builds customer trust and improves the reputation of restaurants by promoting transparency in food service.

Certain food businesses are required to follow menu labelling rules. These include restaurants and cafes with a central FSSAI license, large food chains with ten or more outlets, e-commerce food platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, and Uber Eats delivering from these restaurants, as well as five-star hotels, large departmental canteens, and flight and railway caterers. These businesses must ensure that clear and accurate food information is available on all platforms where their menu is displayed.

However, not all food businesses need to follow these rules. Small restaurants with fewer than ten outlets, temporary food stalls at fairs or religious gatherings that operate for less than 60 days a year, and mid-day meal programs in schools are exempted. These exemptions ensure that only large-scale businesses are required to follow menu labelling, while smaller vendors and public food programs are not burdened by these regulations.

Menu labels should be visible on physical menus and boards, digital menus, and food advertisements. This ensures that customers can see the details before placing an order, whether they are dining in, ordering online, or viewing advertisements. The information displayed must include the calorific value and serving size of each dish, allergen details, and symbols indicating whether the food is vegetarian or non-vegetarian.

The calorific value, or the number of calories per serving, should be listed next to the food item's name or price. The portion size must also be mentioned to help customers compare different food options. A reference statement, such as "An average active adult requires 2,000 kcal per day. However, calorie needs may vary," must be included. A 25% deviation in calorie values is allowed to account for minor differences in food preparation.

Allergen information is crucial for customers with food allergies. Restaurants must list allergens if the food contains gluten, milk and dairy products, eggs, peanuts and tree nuts, fish and seafood, soybeans, or sulphites. This information can be shown as text or symbols on the menu. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian symbols help customers quickly identify food choices based on their dietary preferences. A green circle inside a square indicates vegetarian food, while a brown triangle inside a square represents non-vegetarian food.

Menu labelling is an important step towards healthier eating habits in India. By displaying calorie and nutritional details, restaurants help customers make well-informed choices about what they eat and what they feed their children when dining out. One of the key benefits of menu labelling is that it encourages consumers to choose smaller portions, reducing the risk of obesity and other health problems. It also helps promote public health by making people more aware of their food intake and encouraging balanced diets.

For restaurants and quick-service restaurants (QSRs), menu labelling provides a competitive advantage by positioning them as health-conscious and transparent businesses. By following FSSAI regulations, food establishments can gain customer trust, improve their market reputation, and maintain their market share. These regulations have been mandated under Sub-Regulation 2.4.6 of the Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) First Amendment Regulations, 2020, as part of the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSS Act), 2006. Additionally, FSSAI issued directions on December 28, 2021, under Section 16(5) of the FSS Act, 2006, providing businesses time to adapt to these regulations until June 30, 2022.

Ultimately, menu labelling benefits both consumers and businesses. It allows people to eat more mindfully, supports public health, and ensures that restaurants operate with greater responsibility and transparency. By providing clear and accurate information, menu labelling helps consumers make healthier choices and promotes a more informed and healthier society.

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