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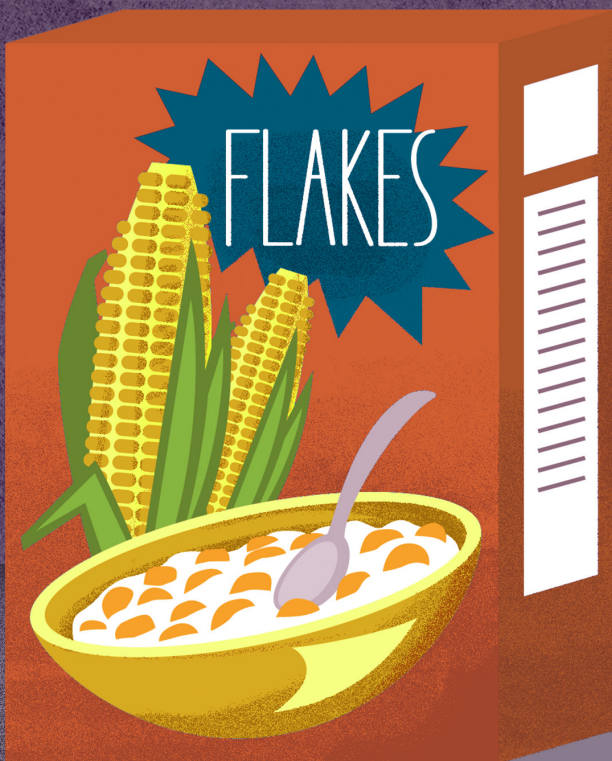
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A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

FOOD FRIGHT!

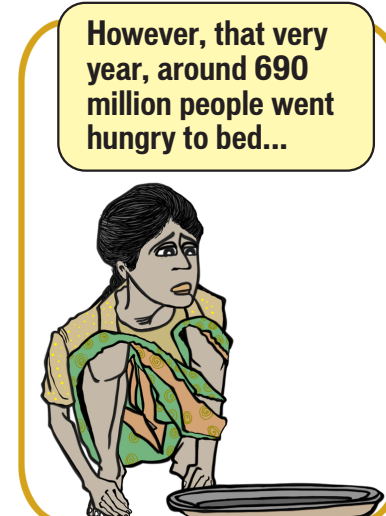
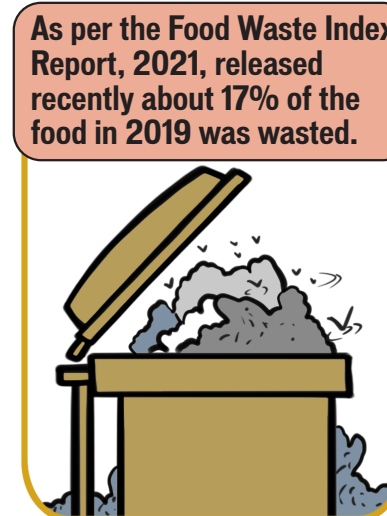
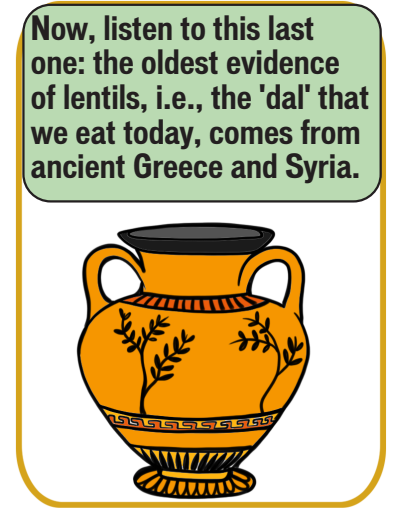
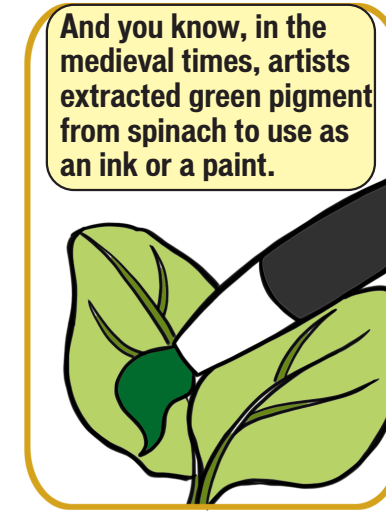
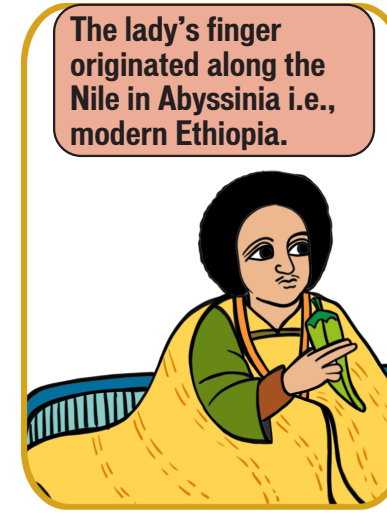
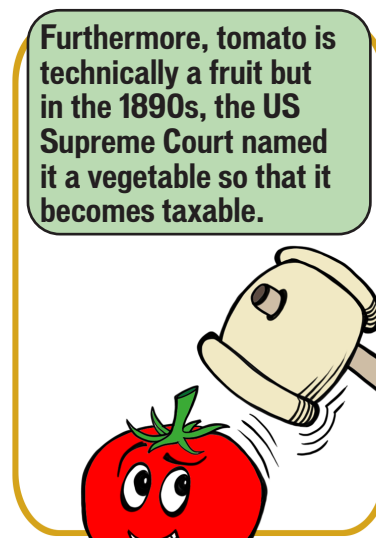
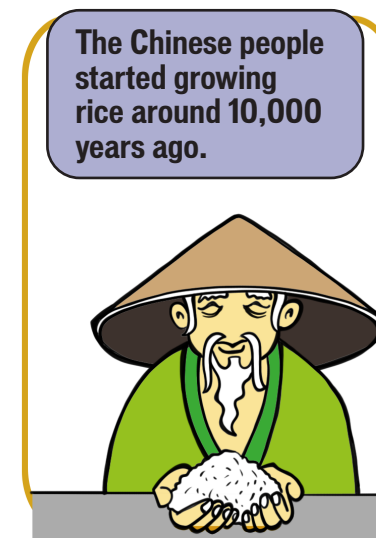
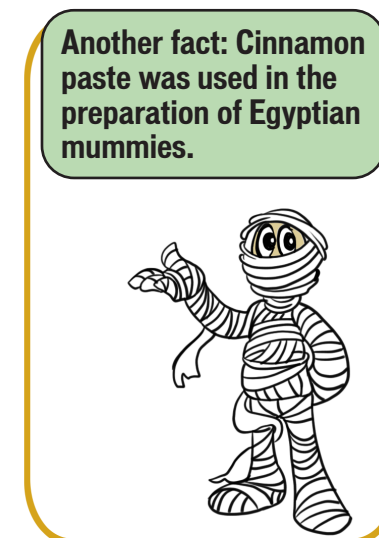
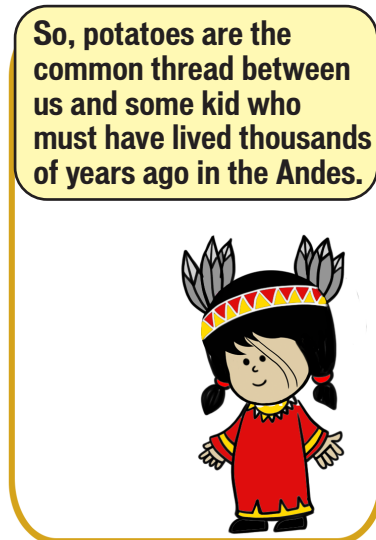
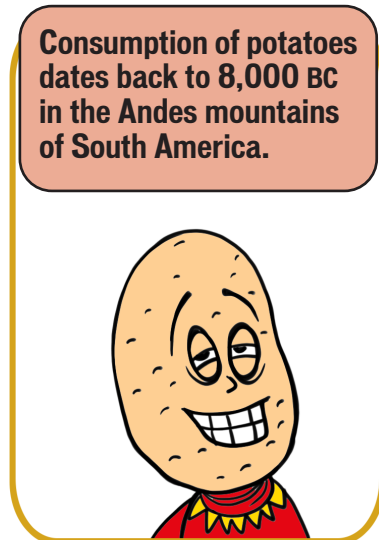
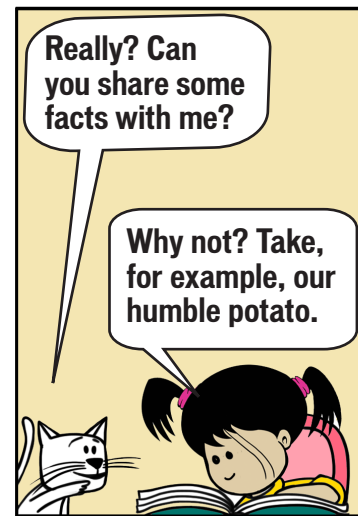
Decode 'food labels' and dispel
the devil of packaged foods.



Comics

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

by *SORIT*



Comics



A...What? Food Label?



An alert issued regarding unhealthy packaged foods, and how food nutrition labels can and cannot help us to become aware.

Mohammad Abdul Halim

I know you all kids must be excited about Dusshera and Diwali. The whole month you'll be exchanging sweets and offering scrumptious feasts. Our friends and families will enjoy beautifully wrapped gifts of savouries—chocolates, candies, chips, soft drinks, and what not! Their advertisements will flood our television screens and social media, and even masquerade as

a renewed form of celebration with the days of homemade delicacies bygone. Attractive packaging will push the festive sales amidst all the buzz around.

Am sure, you would've received umpteen reminders of how such packet-*wala khana* (packaged food in Hindi) is unhealthy. In fact, why it is bad is very puzzling for researchers. Is it detrimental because of the added

chemicals, the preparation method, or any other? If chemicals are an issue, then what is the limit of adding or avoiding them? If the prep is problematic, then how should it be rectified? How should the food-makers present all the ingredient-related information to us? How should we become more aware?... All these are big issues related to food.

The Good and the Bad Food

In order to know which food is good and which is not, we need to know what it contains and how it is made. Based on the nature and extent of the industrial processes involved in food manufacturing, scientists have categorized all the foods and beverages we consume into four types. They call it the NOVA classification system. As per this system, the categorisation is as follows.

I Unprocessed and minimally processed foods: These are natural and unaltered foods, which are minimally processed so that they are easy to eat. Their processing includes drying, pasteurizing, removing of inedible parts, etc. Examples include fresh fruits and vegetables, rice grains, pasteurized milk, frozen raw meat, etc.

II Processed culinary ingredients: These are food products made from the Group-1 foods. For example, salt, sugar, butter, herbs, spices, cooking oils, etc. These are mainly used for cooking and seasoning the Group-1 foods.

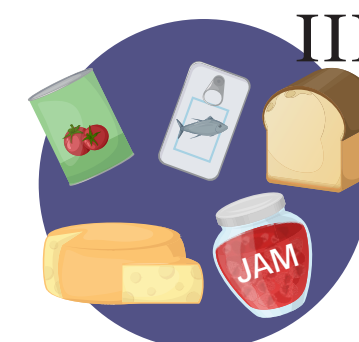
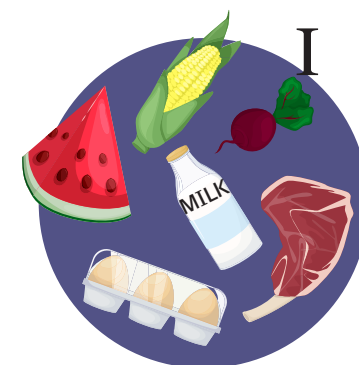
III Processed foods: These are Group-1 foods to which Group-2 foods are added for enhancing their taste and

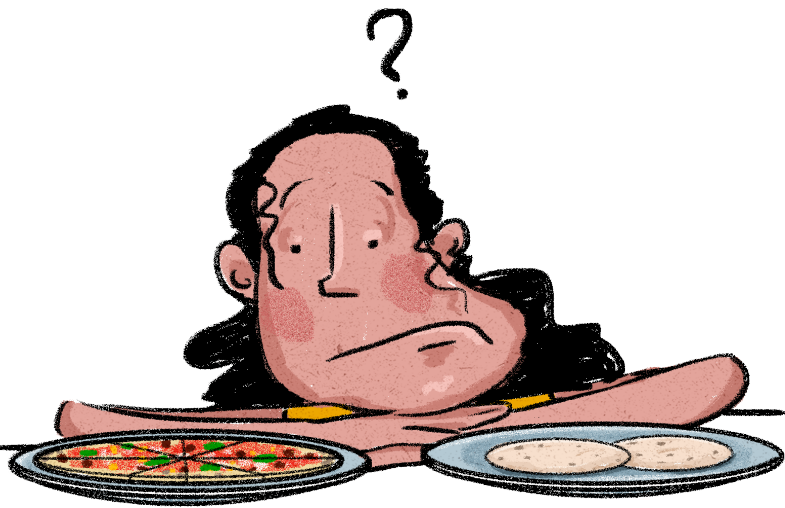
Most of the packaged foods sold in our market are ultra processed and are High in saturated Fat, Salt, and Sugar (HFSS).

preservation. Examples include bread, cheese, vegetables and pulses in brine, canned fruits in syrup, etc.

IV Ultra-processed foods: These are industry-made foods. They can be stored for a long time and include food additives like artificial flavours, colours, and emulsifiers. They also contain processed raw materials, like hydrogenated fats and modified starches; and ingredients not used in households like, soy protein isolates. They comprise a plethora of packaged foods like pizza, burger, soft drinks, French fries, chips, pastries, biscuits, candies, instant soups and noodles, ready-to-eat meals, frozen foods, etc.

In fact, most of the packaged foods sold in our market are ultra-processed and are High in saturated Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS). They give high calories but very low or nil proteins, vitamins, minerals, and fibres. Their nutritional value is highly unbalanced which does not fulfil our body's requirements. Worse, they may also contain multiple chemicals such as preservatives, colours, flavouring agents, emulsifiers, acidity regulators, and anti-caking and glazing agents. Emulsifiers—like ammonium phosphatides and polyglycerol polyricinoleate—and colours—like titanium dioxide, tartrazine, indigotine,





sunset yellow, and erythrosine—are labelled as numbers, which are obviously difficult to decode. Packaged foods often have low-quality ingredients, like high fructose corn syrups and maltodextrins. Some may also have artificial sweeteners, like acesulfame potassium and aspartame, which are harmful for children, and pregnant and lactating women. These synthetic compounds can negatively affect our wellbeing. Hence, such ultra-processed foods are called ‘junk foods’.

Consuming a lot of junk can trigger multifarious issues like overweightness, obesity, dental caries, constipation, type-2 diabetes, and increased

blood pressure. In the long run, these can increase the risk of heart disease and certain kinds of cancer, such as that of the colon. They are addictive and can cause behavioural disorders among children. Not to forget, their plastic packaging, though appealing, is environmentally hazardous too. Therefore, we have to be very careful about what we eat.

Making the Right Choice

What do you like more—pizza or roti, chocolate or milk-cake, soft drink or *shikanji*, and chips or homemade *pakoras*? If pizza, chocolate, soft drink, and chips come to your mind, then it’s

not your fault entirely. We are habituated to them because we do not realise their ill-effects. And why do we not realise?...

Just look at the marketing campaigns of any of these junk items and I bet you’ll be lured and carried away by them. I’m sure you’d even remember the punch lines of many soft drinks, ice creams, burgers, and pizzas, which are aggressively targeted at little kids like you. When their ads bombard you through cartoons, YouTube, Google, and sporting tournaments like cricket, you guys innocently assume the junk to be harmless. Entertainment celebrities, who we trust or follow, endorse these tempting packages very tactfully.

People willingly consume them because their ads, often rampant and misleading, convince us that it is ‘cool’ to have them. Their manufacturers leave us ignorant about their actual ingredients and, of course, their taste is addictive. Not just children but most adults are their prey and hence we continue to munch them even when they can be very damaging. So, how can we become alert to the danger in our food? The answer is: easy-to-understand food labels.

What is a Food Label and How Do We Read It?

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), a government body, mandates that all packaged foods in India must carry information about the foods being sold in their packets. They must list the amount of ‘Energy’, ‘Total fat’, ‘Saturated fat’, ‘Trans-fat’, ‘Added sugar’, and ‘Sodium’ present per 100gm or 100ml of food given inside a packet. All of this, which is often mentioned as a label on the pack, should help people know clearly about the quality of that food. However, this system of food labelling—also known as nutrition information labels—is very complicated.

Most food labels are given at the back of a packet, which are easily ignored by consumers. They are mostly in English, which is incomprehensible to a majority in our multi-linguistic country. Their font sizes are tiny and illegible. Importantly, they contain a lot of technical jargon, twisted numbers, and names of confusing chemicals. Often, they provide this data based on a serving size which is not standardized and hence these labels can be highly inconsistent across the same

India must adopt warning labels, because people should be alerted about unhealthy foods and not be falsely assured by star ratings.

kind of products from different companies. Further, even when all the required information is published, it is helpful only if we are aware about how much of an ingredient should we consume.

Due to the limitations of food labels, many countries have begun adopting Front of Pack Labels (FOPL) since the last two decades. These have multiple versions, like traffic-light labels of the UK and Nutri-Score of France. But the most effective ones are nutrient-specific warning labels adopted in several South American countries like Chile, Brazil, and Peru. These are also followed in Canada and Israel, where symbols-based logos are used. Such logos are also suitable to countries with high illiteracy, like ours.

In fact, in India, FOPL has been discussed for several years. Last month, the FSSAI proposed a design based on the Health Star Rating (HSR) of Australia and New Zealand. The HSR rates the healthiness of a food based on a five-star scale. But it does not issue any warning alert. Thus, it will not take us away from junk foods. Worldwide, HSR has been rejected as industry-friendly and threatening for consumers. That’s why, India must adopt the global best practices i.e., warning labels, because people should be alerted about unhealthy foods and not be falsely assured by star ratings. Warning labels will help us choose our food wisely, including during the festive season. Thus, wishing you all a very good health and warm greetings for every reason!

The author was the Deputy Programme Manager (2020–22), Sustainable Food Systems, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi.



NUTRITION INFORMATION			
	Per 100g	Per 3 Chunks (13.8g)	
Energy	2210 kJ/530 kcal	305 kJ/73 kcal	1
Fat	30.5g	4.2g	2
of which Saturates	18.5g	2.6g	
Carbohydrate	56.5g	7.8g	
of which Sugars	56g	7.7g	3
Fibre	0.7g	0.1g	
Protein	7.5g	1g	
	0.23g	0.03g	6
Amounts per serving %DV* Amount			
Total Fat	12g	18%	Total
Sat. Fat	7g	35%	Diet
Trans Fat	0g		Sug
Cholest.	10mg	3%	Prote
Sodium	30mg	1%	
*Percent Daily Values (DV) are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Vitamin A 0% • Vitamin C 0% • C			

1 ‘Kcal’

means kilocalorie. It is the unit of energy. Often junk foods are energy-dense i.e., they have high calories per 100 g or 100 ml or serve size.

2 Often low in ‘Protein’ and high in ‘Sugar’ and ‘Fat’, junk foods are not only energy-dense but also highly unbalanced nutrition-wise.

3 ‘Sugars’

are simple carbohydrates. The lesser we eat, the better. Besides, which ‘Sugar’ are we referring to here—added or natural? Added sugars are often mass-produced, low-quality, and more harmful than the natural ones.

4 Trans-fat damages our heart. It gets deposited in our arteries and blocks the blood circulation to our heart. Thus, the less trans-fat we consume, the better.

5 Many wouldn’t know that ‘Sodium’ here, mainly refers to common salt i.e. the sodium chloride.

6 How do we know if these amounts are harmful or safe? Further, these are deliberately based on small serving sizes so that the proportionate salt, sugar, and fat present in them appear low in quantity and, therefore, the food seems to be less unhealthy. Thus, children end up eating more of this junk.

Harmings



JUNKILLS

Our junk food contains high amounts of fat, sugar, salt, and ajinomoto, which alters our brain's chemistry in the same way drug addiction does. Many fast-food restaurants use TBHQ, a chemical preservative, which causes nausea, vomiting, and even death. Excessively harping upon such food releases dopamine, the pleasure-causing hormone, and loosens our control over hunger. Gradually, it desensitizes us to high levels of dopamine, provoking us to eat more and more of such food to get a fast-food high.

Ritika Bohra/GT