

Sugar Boards: Encouraging Children Towards A Healthy Lifestyle

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Food and beverage brands in the market under the guise of 'nutritious and healthy', often sell products with sugar content that is dangerous for children. Early introduction to elevated amounts of sugar may foster a preference toward sweet tastes and persistent cravings, even into adulthood. Studies have shown that sugars account for a disproportionate contribution to dietary energy intake in children. 13% of daily energy intake in children aged 4 to 10 years, and 15% in those aged 11 to 18 years, is contributed by sugar, against the cap of 10% as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The dietary habits of the majority of the population from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including India, have changed drastically over the past fifty years. Traditional breastfeeding and home-cooked meals have given way to bottle-feeding and diets that are heavy in sugar, saturated fats, ultra-processed foods (UPFs), and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB). This has fueled a steep rise in the double burden of obesity and undernutrition in children. Once regarded as a disease only seen in adults and the elderly, type 2 diabetes cases are on the rise in children and adolescents, thanks to the "sweet and slow poisons" in our diets. There are several studies that have linked consumption of SSB, defined as beverages with added sugars including sodas, fruit drinks and sweetened milk, to childhood obesity, metabolic syndrome, hypertension, functional gastrointestinal disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, and poor oral health. In addition to high sugar content, many SSBs also contain caffeine, which over time leads to addiction.

Taking cognizance of this, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) released recommendations on limiting added dietary sugars for children and adolescents. Taking a cue, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has recently directed more than 24,000 affiliated schools throughout India to set up "sugar boards." These

boards are intended to display information that educates students about the dangers associated with excessive sugar consumption. These boards would serve as information kiosks that outline the recommended daily sugar intake, list sugar content in frequently consumed foods (including unhealthy options), highlight health risks linked to excessive sugar consumption, and present healthier food alternatives. School cafeterias need to refrain from providing sugary snacks and UPFs like chips, aerated drinks, packaged fruit juices and savories like samosas, pakoras and cutlets. Healthy food choices like fresh fruits and wholesome cooked meals including dals, seasonal vegetables, curd, chapatis and rice should be made available to students in schools. Balanced meals with adequate protein and healthy fats help stabilize blood sugar levels and reduce sugar pangs. The CBSE has also advised schools to organize awareness seminars and workshops in this regard, and provide a brief report, substantiated by photographs, on the implementation of sugar boards by July 15, 2025.

Meanwhile, the WHO also advocates front-of-pack (FoP) labels on packaged foods. These labels provide another straightforward, visual display of information regarding the nutrient composition or nutritional quality of the products for consumers. Pediatricians need to complement the role played by parents, schools and the government in fostering healthy eating habits. Counseling of children and their families regarding mindful eating and adequate physical activity can go a long way in developing healthy lifestyle. Together, we can fight this epidemic.

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