

Maharashtra school canteens adopt healthier menus, curb obesity

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Parle Tilak High School caterer switched from maida to wheat buns (Express)

When it began, it was in the form of inspections in school and college canteens, small discussions with principals to do away with aerated drinks, packaged chips, specially vada pavs that seemed a favourite in every canteen. But eventually, it was a humungous task with the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reaching out to a lakh schools and colleges across Maharashtra to change canteen menus and inculcate healthier options. The move has been met with a small measure of success — across Mumbai, 29 schools and colleges, and across the state, some 250 schools have modified their canteen menus.

It started with a circular in May 2019 from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) banning junk food and food high in fat, salt, sugar content in school canteens. “We

didn't expect an overnight change. Our food inspectors would visit canteens, advise the principal to remove cold drinks, junk food. It was encouraging to see at least few respond, although we would have liked more schools to come forward," says Ananya Rege, food safety officer in state's FDA.

In the last seven months, at least 1,000 such schools and colleges have been visited since. In Vile Parle, a middle-class locality in Mumbai's suburbs, Parle Tilak English High School's canteen earlier sold vada pavs — the favourite quick bite for Maharashtrians— for Rs 10. "We realised kids were eating maida and a deep-fried item. Our caterer improvised and starting using wheat flour to make burger buns and stuffed vegetables in the patty," said principal Swapna Trailokya. Caterer Vishwas Kulkarni first experimented with pulao and salad but children did not like it. "The challenge is to give them nutritious food, which is also tasty and light on the pocket. I then prepared a wheat flour-based burger," he says.

It took weeks for FDA to counsel principals, caterers and parents. They would hold two-hour-long sessions in schools and explain to students the impact of junk food. To parents and teachers, food safety officers would explain alternatives to chips and cold drinks.

The need to do away with junk stems from rising obesity cases amongst children in schools. Right to Information data gathered by NGO Praja Foundation shows in 2018-19 civic schools recorded 1,421 "overweight" children in Mumbai.

Maharashtra FDA commissioner Pallavi Darade said they are urging University Grants Commission to make a healthy menu a compulsion for schools and colleges. "Right now, it is an educative approach. But to make everyone comply will also need some form of regulation," she said.

Link:- <https://in.news.yahoo.com/maharashtra-state-school-canteens-adopt-211235855.html>