

Combating obesity among adolescents

There is an increased focus in public discourse on growing obesity among adolescents. The seventh edition of Poshan Pakhwada, held last month, focused on childhood and adolescent obesity alongside the first 1,000 days of life. The 'Let's Fix Our Food' consortium, a multi-stakeholder initiative spearheaded by the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition, the Public Health Foundation of India, UNICEF-India, and others, recently released a set of policy briefs advocating for the need to better the food environments for adolescents. Last month, in a move to improve transparency on food labels, the Supreme Court gave the Central government a strict three-month window to finalise and enforce transparent food labelling regulations. These measures point towards growing concern about the problem.

Nutrition paradox

Adolescence is a period of rapid growth and transformation that lays the foundation for future health and well-being. Yet, in India, this crucial stage is being compromised not only by the problem of under nutrition but also by an emerging epidemic of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases. Ironically, we now live in an era where reaching for a highly processed packaged food item is more convenient than choosing healthier alternatives. Poor nutrition, driven by the aggressive marketing and widespread availability of ultra-processed foods, is pushing our youth towards a lifetime burden of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. This is threatening their well-being and also the nation's long-term productivity and growth.

India has, for a while, been facing a nutrition paradox where under nutrition and obesity coexist. While malnutrition



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persists among children, obesity and diet-related diseases are surging at an alarming rate. As per the World Obesity Atlas 2024, India has one of the steepest annual increases in childhood obesity globally. The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey indicates that on average, over 5% of adolescents in India and as many as 10-15% in about 10 States are either overweight or obese. For a country with a fifth of its population being adolescents, this is deeply concerning.

Adolescents are among the most vulnerable yet least empowered. In an apparently liberal food environment, their food choices appear to be many, but healthier options are not easy to find. Food choices are shaped by schools, social media, peer influence, and aggressive marketing. As highly processed foods, sugary drinks, and high sodium foods become dietary staples, obesity rates among teenagers continue to climb at an alarming pace. Nutrition, however, is not just a health issue – it directly impacts education, mental well-being, and future productivity. Poor nutrition is linked to decreased concentration, lower academic performance, and higher absenteeism, limiting students' potential. In our current food systems frameworks, a shift in power towards children (or those who uphold children's rights) is imminent to achieve healthy and equitable food systems that prioritise children's well-being. Government policies such as making nutrition a 'Jan Andolan (people's movement)', and school health and wellness programmes, will create greater awareness on nutrition.

Dealing with the crisis

What we essentially need is a two-pronged approach: strong regulatory policies that prioritise adolescent health and active youth engagement. How can policies ensure that healthy foods become accessible, affordable, and most importantly, aspirational in our

diverse food environments? Fiscal measures such as a health tax on high fat, salt, and sugar, and subsidies for nutrient-rich foods, have proven to be somewhat effective in discouraging consumption of sugar sweetened beverages in other countries. We must implement front-of-pack nutrition labels to enable informed consumer choices, alongside stricter regulations to curb misleading advertisements targeting children, particularly on digital platforms and in schools.

Schools too play a critical role in shaping children's food environments. Nutrition education in schools and communities can empower the youth to make informed food choices, and take up physical activity. However, the problem is not only about a lack of awareness or bad food choices. There is a need to enhance food literacy as an essential life skill that can equip adolescents to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food, whether they are bought from outside or prepared at home; help them choose diverse diets from what is locally grown; and to be able to read and decipher the information on food labels.

We also need inter-ministerial coordination. Nutrition falls under multiple ministries – Women and Child Development, Health, Agriculture, Industry, Consumer Affairs, and Education – and each is working on different aspects. However, without convergence in discourse and action, efforts remain fragmented. Initiatives such as Poshan Abhiyaan provide a framework for collaboration, but a united front from multiple sectors can advocate for stronger regulatory frameworks.

It is time to acknowledge that a healthier India demands more than awareness – it requires healthy eating plates, playgrounds, policy action, youth leadership, and a major shift in our food environments. When we prioritise healthy beginnings, we will pave the way for a hopeful future.