



## FOREWORD

Junk food is junk by its very definition. But how bad is it and what is it that companies do not tell people about this food? This is what the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) laboratory checked. The results were both predictable and alarming.

First the study: CSE tested all that is readily available in fast food outlets or as branded and packaged items in shops across the country. These ranged from instant noodles, chips and Indian bhujia to the ubiquitous colas, chicken, fries and burgers.

Junk food is defined as food with empty calories — it provides fat, sugar and salt, without nutrition. The CSE study reconfirmed this but with a difference. Labels on packages do not explain just how much of our daily salt, sugar or fat quota this “fun” food is taking up. We are not told that one packet of chips, devoured easily, supplies half of what we should take daily in terms of fat and salt; one bottle of cola has twice the daily added sugar allowance of adults and children. It is not in the interest of food companies to advertise this. It is in our interest to know.

The study also found that companies were not just irresponsible through omission, but also through deliberate misrepresentation of facts about the quantity of trans fatty acids — trans fats in short — in their products. Trans fats, formed during hydrogenation of oil, are linked to serious health problems. But the Indian law does not require companies to declare the quantity of trans fat in their products.

There are many operative misses in this regulation. Companies can determine their own size of serving and they do. Indian food giant Haldiram’s, for instance, takes 10 gm, which is less than a mouthful, as the serving size. That’s how it claims to be trans fat-free. It can get away with this because nobody is checking.

Following the CSE tests two questions were raised. One, why should one test junk food when it is already known to be bad? Two, why test only packaged food when all Indian snacks are said to be equally bad?

First, as the study shows, we do not know just how bad this food really is. We should know more because it is critical we take informed decisions about our health. Non-communicable diseases, from hypertension to cancer, are a global epidemic now. Bad food and bad lifestyle are major causes of these diseases.

Secondly, it must be made clear that traditional and local diets are built on the principle of moderation and balance. Problem arises when one adds “new” food and makes it universal — “McDonalised” it or “supersize” it. Therefore, the right thing to do is not to pit junk food against Indian snacks but to consider how much and what you eat. The choice is yours to make. So eat at your own risk.

— Sunita Narain