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FSSAI Proposes Red Hexagon Warning Labels for High Fat, Sugar and Salt Foods

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FSSAI Proposes Red Hexagon Warning Labels for High Fat, Sugar and Salt Foods

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has proposed red hexagonal front-of-pack warning labels for packaged foods high in fat, sugar or salt, in a compliance affidavit filed before the Supreme Court and reported on August 28 and 29, 2026. The affidavit was filed in compliance with a Supreme Court order passed in August 2026, on August 13. It proposes a threshold warning mark rather than the Indian Nutrition Rating, the star-rating model FSSAI had favoured earlier and put on hold in February 2026 pending further research.

WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED

The mark. A red hexagonal symbol carrying a plain-language warning. The proposed legends are “HIGH FAT”, “HIGH SUGAR”, “HIGH SALT” and “HIGHLY SWEETENED BEVERAGE”, together with paired combinations where a product breaches more than one threshold.

The size rule. The warning text must be **at least one point larger** than the font used in the back-of-pack nutrition information table. This is a deliberate anti-evasion provision: the standard industry response to disclosure mandates is compliance in the smallest permissible type.

The thresholds. Nutrient limits are aligned to the **ICMR-NIN Dietary Guidelines for Indians, 2024**, issued by the National Institute of Nutrition under the Indian Council of Medical Research.

The rollout.

PHASE	COVERAGE
Phase I	Products crossing thresholds on two or more target nutrients, plus highly sweetened beverages
Phase II	Extended to products breaching a single nutrient threshold

THE TWO MODELS, AND WHY THE CHOICE MATTERS

Front-of-pack nutrition labelling has been under discussion in India for roughly a decade without resolution, and the change of model is the substance of the news.

What was proposed earlier: the Indian Nutrition Rating (INR). A **star-rating** system, awarding a product between half a star and five stars based on a composite score computed from its overall nutritional profile, including positive nutrients such as fruit, nut, vegetable and protein content offsetting negative ones.

What is proposed now: an interpretive warning label. A binary mark that appears when a threshold is crossed, saying only that the product is high in a specified nutrient.

The difference is not cosmetic. A composite score can be **reformulated around** without meaningfully improving the product, by adding a positive-scoring ingredient to offset sugar or salt. A **threshold warning cannot be gamed in that way**: either the product is above the sugar limit or it is not. A star rating also communicates *relative* merit, which can make a nutritionally poor product look acceptable because it scored better than an even worse one. This is the core reason public health researchers have consistently preferred warning marks.

The judicial trigger. The proposal reached the Court as a **compliance affidavit** responding to an order **passed in** August 2026, on **August 13**, in a public interest litigation filed by **3S and Our Health Society**, a public charitable trust. It is a response to a judicial direction, not a spontaneous regulatory initiative.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

India is joining an established regulatory family, and the details matter for Prelims.

COUNTRY	MARK	YEAR
Chile	Black octagon	2016 , the global pioneer
Mexico	Black octagon	2020
Peru	Black octagon	2019
Israel	Red label	2020
India (proposed)	Red hexagon	Proposed 2026

*Chile, Mexico and Peru use a **black octagon**. India's proposal is a **red hexagon**. These are easily confused in an options list.*

The Chilean evidence is the most cited in the literature: following the 2016 law, which combined warning labels with restrictions on child-directed marketing and on sales in schools, studies recorded a substantial fall in purchases of sugar-sweetened beverages. That evidence, and the parallel finding that composite scoring systems are more readily gamed by reformulation, is the **empirical** basis for the model India has now adopted.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The case for warning labels is strong and largely settled among public health researchers. They are interpretive rather than informational: they do not require the consumer to read a table, understand percentages of daily value, or perform arithmetic at the shelf. In a country with wide variation in literacy and numeracy, a symbol that says *high in sugar* does work that a nutrition panel does not.

The design is also unusually well thought through in one specific respect. The requirement that the warning be set **at least one point larger** than the back-of-pack table anticipates the most predictable form of technical compliance. Regulations that specify content but not prominence are routinely satisfied in a way that defeats their purpose.

Three objections deserve to be taken seriously.

First, compliance cost. India's food processing sector includes a very large number of micro, small and medium enterprises. Redesigning packaging, re-testing products against thresholds and managing existing stock imposes a fixed cost that falls disproportionately on small manufacturers. A phased rollout mitigates this but does not remove it.

Second, and more fundamentally, the target may be too narrow. A substantial share of India's dietary risk comes from **loose, unpackaged and street food**, which carries no label at all and falls outside the scheme entirely. Front-of-pack labelling regulates the segment that is easiest to regulate, which is not necessarily the segment doing the most harm.

Third, the risk that Phase II never arrives. The two-phase design is sensible, but a phase without a **statutory** commencement date is a phase that can be deferred indefinitely. Under Phase I, a product breaching only the sugar threshold carries no mark at all, which is a significant coverage gap.

The public health context makes the stakes concrete. India carries one of the world's largest burdens of diabetes and a rapidly rising prevalence of obesity, including childhood obesity. The **National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases** and the associated **National NCD Monitoring Framework** target halting the rise in obesity and diabetes, and dietary regulation is among the few population-level instruments available.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to the development and management of the social sector relating to health; government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation; statutory and regulatory bodies.

GS Paper 3: Food processing and related industries in India, including scope, significance and regulation.

Prelims angle: the shape and colour of the mark, the shelved Indian Nutrition Rating, the ICMR-NIN 2024 guidelines as the threshold source, and the statutory basis of FSSAI are all directly examinable.

Mains angle: *“Interpretive labels change behaviour; informational labels change disclosure.”* Use the star-rating-versus-warning-label choice to illustrate the general principle that regulatory design should anticipate the regulated party’s optimising response.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE PROPOSAL:

Filed as a compliance affidavit before the Supreme Court, reported August 28 and 29, 2026.

Mark: a red hexagon. Legends: HIGH FAT, HIGH SUGAR, HIGH SALT, HIGHLY SWEETENED BEVERAGE, plus paired combinations.

Warning text must be at least one point larger than the back-of-pack nutrition table font.

Thresholds aligned to the ICMR-NIN Dietary Guidelines for Indians, 2024.

Phase I: products breaching two or more nutrient thresholds, plus highly sweetened beverages.

Phase II: extended to a single nutrient breach.

Filed in compliance with a Supreme Court order passed in August 2026, on August 13.

Proposes a threshold warning in place of the Indian Nutrition Rating (INR) star-rating model, which FSSAI put on hold in February 2026.

Proposed exemptions: single-ingredient products and foods inherently rich in these nutrients, including ghee, oils, salt, sugar, jaggery and honey.

PIL filed by 3S and Our Health Society, a public charitable trust.

FSSAI:

A statutory body established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, which consolidated earlier laws including the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954.

Administrative ministry: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Headquarters: New Delhi.

Functions: setting standards, licensing and registration of food businesses, laboratory accreditation, and enforcement through Food Safety Commissioners, Designated Officers and Food Safety Officers at State level.

Flagship demand-side initiative: the Eat Right India movement.

INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE:

Chile, 2016: the global pioneer, using a black octagon, alongside restrictions on child-directed marketing and on sales in schools.

Peru (2019) and Mexico (2020) also use the black octagon. Israel uses a red label.

India's proposed mark is a red hexagon, not an octagon.

THE TWO LABELLING PHILOSOPHIES:

Informational (nutrition panel, guideline daily amounts): presents numbers and leaves interpretation to the consumer.

Interpretive (warning marks, traffic lights, star ratings): makes the judgement for the consumer.

Within interpretive labels, a composite score such as a star rating can be offset by adding positively-scoring ingredients; a threshold warning cannot.

RELATED HEALTH ARCHITECTURE:

ICMR-NIN: the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, under the Indian Council of Medical Research.

National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) and the National NCD Monitoring Framework.

Sustainable Development Goal 3.4: reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases by one third by 2030.

WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (2004), the international policy anchor for dietary regulation.

WATCH THE TRAP:

Hexagon, not octagon. India's proposal differs in shape from the Chilean and Mexican model.

The Indian Nutrition Rating was shelved in February 2026, before this affidavit. The abandonment of the star system is not itself this week's news; the red hexagon proposal is.

This is a proposal in an affidavit, not a notified regulation. It becomes binding only when notified under the FSS Act.

FSSAI is a statutory body, not a constitutional one, and not a ministry.

Sources: FSSAI, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, ICMR

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