

Iron rice – food fortification

August 2, 2021

In news- A group of 18 health experts in India have raised concerns about the country's strategy to fight malnutrition through food fortification.

Key updates-

- The Government of India is on course to adopt a **policy on mandatory fortification of rice distributed through the social safety network programs such as Integrated Child Development Services and mid-day meal schemes.**
- The scheme was **initiated in 2019-20** and Rs 174.64 crore was sanctioned for a three-year pilot run.
- Such interventions of iron fortification are not being monitored and there is no evidence to show that it has any benefit.
- Instead, such **fortification can be harmful, like the consumption of excess iron by pregnant women can adversely affect fetal development and birth outcomes.**
- Hence the team of experts, consisting of nutritionists, epidemiologists and economists have cautioned specifically against iron supplementation.
- They have warned that mandatory fortification will create markets that will be hard to withdraw when the target of reduced micronutrient deficiency has been achieved.
- They have suggested that instead of fortification, the quality of diet should be improved by increasing the intake of foods from animal sources and fruits.

What is Food Fortification?

- According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), food fortification is defined as **the practice of deliberately**

increasing the content of essential micronutrients so as to improve the nutritional quality of the food supply and to provide a public health benefit with minimal risk to health.

- **Types:** Food fortification can be done for-
 - foods widely consumed by the general population (mass fortification),
 - to fortify foods designed for specific population subgroups, such as complementary foods for young children or rations for displaced populations (targeted fortification),
 - to allow food manufacturers to voluntarily fortify foods available in the marketplace (market-driven fortification).
- In October 2016, **FSSAI** operationalized the **Food Safety and Standards (Fortification of Foods) Regulations, 2016** for fortifying staples namely **Wheat Flour and Rice** (*with Iron, Vitamin B12 and Folic Acid*), **Milk and Edible Oil** (*with Vitamins A and D*) and **Double Fortified Salt** (*with Iodine and Iron*) to reduce the high burden of micronutrient malnutrition in India.
- India's **National Nutritional strategy, 2017**, had listed food fortification as one of the interventions to address anaemia, vitamin A and iodine deficiencies apart from supplementation and dietary diversification.

About Food Fortification Scheme-

- The centrally-sponsored pilot scheme was approved in February 2019, for a three-year period from 2019-20 onwards.
- This **scheme will run till 2023** and rice will be supplied to the beneficiaries at the rate of Re 1 per kilogram.
- Under it, one district each in 15 predominantly rice-eating States was selected.
- It was **rolled out in Madhya Pradesh recently** and

fortified rice is being provided through the targeted public distribution system in Singrauli district.

- However, out of 15 states only 5 – ***Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh***, have started the distribution of fortified rice in their identified pilot districts.
- The Food Corporation of India has now been mandated to scale up the annual supply of Fortified Rice Kernels (FRK) from the current 15,000 tonnes to at least 1.3 lakh tonnes.
- The existing rice mills will be equipped with Blending Machines for mixing FRK with normal rice.