

Purity in Peril: Impact of Food Adulteration on Public Health

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World Health Organisation (WHO), in a report in 2024, states that food safety, nutrition, and security are intricately connected to each other. Every year, 600 million people suffer from contaminated food, which leads to 4,20,000 deaths every year. Low- and middle-income countries lose US\$ 110 billion annually due to unsafe food. Children under five years of age are particularly vulnerable, bearing 40% of the disease burden, because of which approximately 1,25,000 young lives are lost each year.

THERE is a famous saying, “Health is Wealth,” but are we actually living up to it? Because it is important to eat pure and nutritious food to stay fit and healthy. Food, the most basic need of our lives to sustain, is grappling with one of the major challenges called “Food Adulteration”. In the past few years, food quality has become a major public health concern as it has been compromised dramatically by mixing harmful ingredients in food.

Food adulteration is a widespread problem in India, especially in rural communities, semi-urban areas, and urban slums, where consumers are tricked into buying inferior food quality products even after paying fair retail prices. This problem of adulteration spreads across various sectors, from the unorganised street vendors to the more organised supply chains. The recent incidents and controversies related to low-quality food products have highlighted the importance of stringent quality measures across the food supply chain and the need for greater scrutiny.

Among the causes of food adulteration are profit maximisation, shortage and to meet the demand-supply gap, enforcement gaps, consumer ignorance, and globalisation of food industries with different countries using different benchmarks for food acceptance. Some food adulterations are intentional, and others are unintentional, incidental, or due to packaging hazards.

The adulteration of food items is driven primarily by profit motives among producers. Large as well as small business owners often compromise on the quality of products to maximise profits by reducing production costs. For instance, there have been alarming reports cautioning about adulteration in raw honey, where producers mix cheaper sugar syrup into it. Such unethical practices pose grave health risks as the true nature of the items remains hidden.

The Government of India report states that during the period of 2018 and 2019, 26,000 food samples were found adulterated or misbranded in India. The Food Safety and