

Centre to introduce fortified rations in 118 target districts

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NEWDELHI: The NDA government will introduce fortified rations (vitamin- and supplement-added wheat and rice) in 118 so-called 'aspirational districts' to improve nutrition outcomes among children and women in the first initiative under the National Nutrition Mission, designed by Niti Aayog, the government think-tank and the food ministry, according to a Food Ministry official requesting anonymity.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Cabinet cleared the National Nutrition Mission in December last year with a three-year budget of ₹9,046.17 crore, starting 2017-18. The programme's targets are to reduce stunting levels, under-nutrition, anaemia and low birth weight.

According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, 35.7% of children below five years are underweight, while 38.4% are stunted, meaning they have low height for their age.

Iron and folic acid have been identified as two main nutrients to be added to food grains supplied

under the public distribution system, according to the official.

A National Council on Nutrition under the chairmanship of the vice-chairman of the Niti Aayog, Rajiv Kumar, has been formed. It will report to the Prime Minister every six months. An additional 235 districts will be covered in a proposed second leg of the plan, the official said.

The norms for fortification of wheat and rice with vitamins and minerals will be according to specifications laid down by the Food Safety and Standards Authority, he added.

"The UN norm is 1% blending, that is 1 kg fortified nutrients in 1 quintal of grains," the same official said.

The so-called aspirational districts are areas with a set of 49 "low-baseline socio-economic indicators", such as in nutrition, infrastructure, overall health and education. "Low-baseline indicators" mean these districts have historically performed poorly on these counts.

"As per the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, the proportion of stunted children came down from 48% in 2005-06 to

38.4%, which is a 10 percentage-points reduction. This tells us that evidence-based policy making can make a difference," said Asha Saha, a former nutritional consultant with Unicef.

In these aspirational districts, wheat and rice will be replaced with fortified varieties. Currently, the food ministry-controlled Food Corporation of India, which runs the PDS system, gets paddy milled by rice-mills before distributing them.

Now mills with fortification machines will be selected for supplying these nutrient-enhanced grains, the official said. In wheat, the process is simpler because nutrients can be plainly mixed. For paddy, rice has to be fortified into fortified rice pellets, the official said.

Under the National Food Security Act, 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population get wheat and rice at ₹2 and ₹3 a kg. Each beneficiary is entitled to 5 kg of these grains a month.

The additional costs of fortified grains will likely further raise the food subsidy bill, which for 2018-19 is ₹1.69 lakh crore.