

Only 2k food samples tested this yr, Maharashtra FDA requires urgent upgrade

The state Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is in dire need of an immediate upgrade to its food testing infrastructure, recent data reveals. In the fiscal year 2022-23, the regulatory authority managed to collect a mere 2,039 food samples from the city, and alarmingly, results for nearly a quarter of these samples are still pending.

What's even more concerning than the shortage of public testing facilities is the fact that the FDA, the primary agency responsible for upholding drug and food standards, has yet to establish full-time positions for food analysts in any of their three laboratories located in Mumbai, Aurangabad, and Nagpur.

Back in 2016, the department submitted a proposal to create these essential roles, but the government has failed to take action on it. Consequently, experts from drug testing laboratories have been temporarily reassigned to act as food analysts in all these labs.

A recent incident involving customers allegedly finding a dead rat in their meal served at an upscale restaurant in Bandra has reignited discussions about public food testing facilities, hygiene standards, and surveillance. Data accessed by TOI reveals that of the 2,039 food samples collected in 2022-2023, 65% met standard quality criteria, but 4% were substandard, 2.2% were misbranded, and 2% were deemed outright unsafe. Currently, the Mumbai lab employs five analysts, Aurangabad has three, and Nagpur has only one, who juggles responsibilities between food and drug testing.

The department primarily collects samples of raw materials, such as oil, cereal, pulses, and milk. Regarding prepared foods, the focus is primarily on sweets, with a particular emphasis during the festival season starting in September. Shailesh Adhao, Joint Commissioner of the FDA, explained that raw materials are the primary focus for purity testing and ensuring they meet the standards and claims listed on labels.

Mr. Adhao added, "We do not collect samples of prepared food as they may not retain their properties by the time they are tested. However, we do expect restaurants to regularly inspect their raw materials and maintain hygienic conditions." Nonetheless, officials concede that while manufacturers are subject to numerous production regulations, eateries face minimal supervision. Maharashtra boasts 1.5 lakh food license holders and a staggering 8.5 lakh registrations for food establishments.

According to the Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006 (FSSAI), eateries or vendors with an annual turnover under Rs 12 lakh can seek registration, while those exceeding this threshold require a license. In Mumbai alone, there are nearly 1.3 lakh active license holders and 2.4 lakh registered entities. However, the city only has 13 food safety officers (FSOs), resulting in infrequent checks for hygiene or sample collection.

Former FDA commissioner Mahesh Zagade has highlighted the government's failure to establish the necessary infrastructure for comprehensive food testing over the years. During his tenure, Zagade proposed an Rs 800 crore plan to build an extensive network of labs at divisional and district levels. However, he noted that despite initial interest from political leadership, the plan was not pursued after his tenure.

A senior FDA official mentioned that a new food testing laboratory is being developed in Pune, with another lab proposed in Nashik. Additionally, preparations are underway for the creation of food analyst positions to address these critical gaps in the system.