

SEASON'S GREETINGS! ENJOY SWEETS CAUTIOUSLY!

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We all love sweets. Indians irrespective of our religion, share sweets with one another and it could be any occasion or ceremony, birthday, marriage, or festival. We also offer sweets daily to the almighty lord, following a culture that runs down right from the Vedic period. Presenting sweets conveys appreciation, admiration, love, affection, gratitude, joy, respect, happiness, reward, or worship. Welcoming visitors with sweets or a sweet beverage, depending on the occasion is common.

Like India's diverse culture, sweets too are very many. Countless types of sweets exist in India varying from region to region; however, the spirit of love behind giving sweets prevails equally throughout. Interestingly, sweet preferences in India depend on the geographical location with hundreds of regional variations. West Bengal alone has over 2000 varieties of sweets for people to consume and enjoy.

Successive generation of temple cooks, and professional sweet makers or halwais were largely responsible in preserving the art of preparing sumptuous sweets, puddings, and desserts, in addition to homemakers in every household. Numerous temples too continue this tradition by making daily sweet offerings to the almighty, and later distributing it as 'Prasad' to the devout.

With festival season approaching, it is time for celebrations and exchange sweets. Mithaiwallahs will sell tons of sweets, bakery items, dairy products, processed foods, and do brisk business.

How much of it will be of good quality and safe for human consumption? Many categories (see below) of sweets are sold during the festive season and they could be of sub-standard quality made in an unhygienic, filthy, cramped place by using inferior quality or adulterated food grains, sugar, milk, oil and the likes.

Health & Family Welfare ministry records state that as per Government labs last year testing reports, **20% of food items in the market, were either substandard or adulterated.** It includes everyday items like edible oil, milk, sugar, food grains, and ready-to-eat packed foods available in grocery shops as well as Kirana stores.

Following a standard procedure, states in the Indian union, collected 29,328 various food item samples from the market, including super malls and wholesale shops, in the financial year 2012-13. Out of these, 5180, or about 20%, were either adulterated or substandard. None of these food items met the standards set by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). **Sadly, the amount of adulterated food making its way to the market is rising, while the figure stood at 8% in 2008-09, it is 20% in 2012-13.**

Food Safety Rules can punish a food business operator involved in the manufacture, storage, distribution, or retail of food items, if the food item is not up to the mark. However, the onus is on the individual states to take stringent action against persons involved in the adulteration business. The average prosecution rate in the past five years according to the ministry's records is only 13%. The low prosecution rate by the authorities of the guilty is thus responsible for this large increase in adulteration.

Improper monitoring mechanism is one more reason. Out of 50 million food business operators or so, only 2% have registered themselves with the state governments until April 2013.

Consumption of adulterated food leads to serious health problems like heart disease, neurological troubles, more so in children. Indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides during production and storage also

contributes significantly to increase in food adulteration. Sweets manufacturers use formalin preservative, a chemical used for preservation of dead bodies. Consuming formalin-mixed products damages kidney and liver. It can cause asthma attacks and cancer. Pregnant women are most vulnerable. Consumption of such food items during pregnancy increases the chances of delivering a physically challenged baby.

Sweet makers use 'edible silver foil' or 'Varkh'. The process of making silver foils is extremely unhygienic, as it involves long hours of beating silver pieces in pouches made of leather using animal intestines.

The presence of skin epidermis or its remnants in the silver foil covering of sweets are very common. Tests conducted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also confirm that adulteration of silver foil with aluminum is increasing. Aluminum is a hazardous metal that over time accumulates in our body, especially brain tissues, and bones causing ill health. It causes severe damage to human placenta and fetus during pregnancy.

Sweets are and will remain an integral part of our celebrations. **Let us celebrate the festival of lights, with JOY & FERVOR!**

ENJOY SWEETS BUT WITH CAUTION!

No	Category	Basic Ingredient Used	Examples
1	Halwa or Puddings	Grains, Fruits, Seeds, Legumes, Vegetables	Wheat Halwa, Rava Halwa, Doodhi Halwa, Carrot Halwa, Chikoo Halwa, Sweet Potato Halwa, etc.
2	Juicy Confections	Cottage Cheese simmered in sugar syrup	Rasgulla, Rajbogh, Cham Cham, Ras Malai, etc.
3	Fudges	Milk	Pedas, Burfi, Milk Ladoos, Kulfi, etc.
4	Grain based and Syrupy sweets	Grains and sugar syrup	Malpua, Jalebi, Jangari, Balushai, Khaja, Mysore Pak, etc.
5	Milk based	Grains, Milk	Payasam (Kheer), Firni, Basundi, etc.
6	Miscellaneous (Many types)	Yogurt cheese, Coconut, Seeds, Grains, Sugar & Jaggery (Gur) based, etc.	Shrikhand, Jaggery Payasam, Nuts Chikki, Sweet Pongal, Modak, Puran Poli, Adhirasam, Soan Papdi, Appam, Shankar Pali, Karanji, etc.

Consumer Tips for buying festival Mithai's or Sweets

- **Buy sweets only from reputed and well-known stores.**
- **Buy only fresh sweets. Avoid consuming sweets with silver foil coverings.**
- **Avoid buying sweets with syrup. This will also reduce consumption of extra calories.**
- **Buy only sweets made from seasonal fruits. They are likely to be fresher.**
- **During festive seasons, avoid buying sweets made out of milk and milk products.**
- **Buy sweets only as much as one can finish eating or is able to consume in a day.**
- **Ideally prepare sweets in one's own kitchen or substitute sweets with dry fruits and chocolates.**

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A VERY HAPPY, SAFE, & PROSPEROUS
DIWALI FESTIVAL SEASON.**