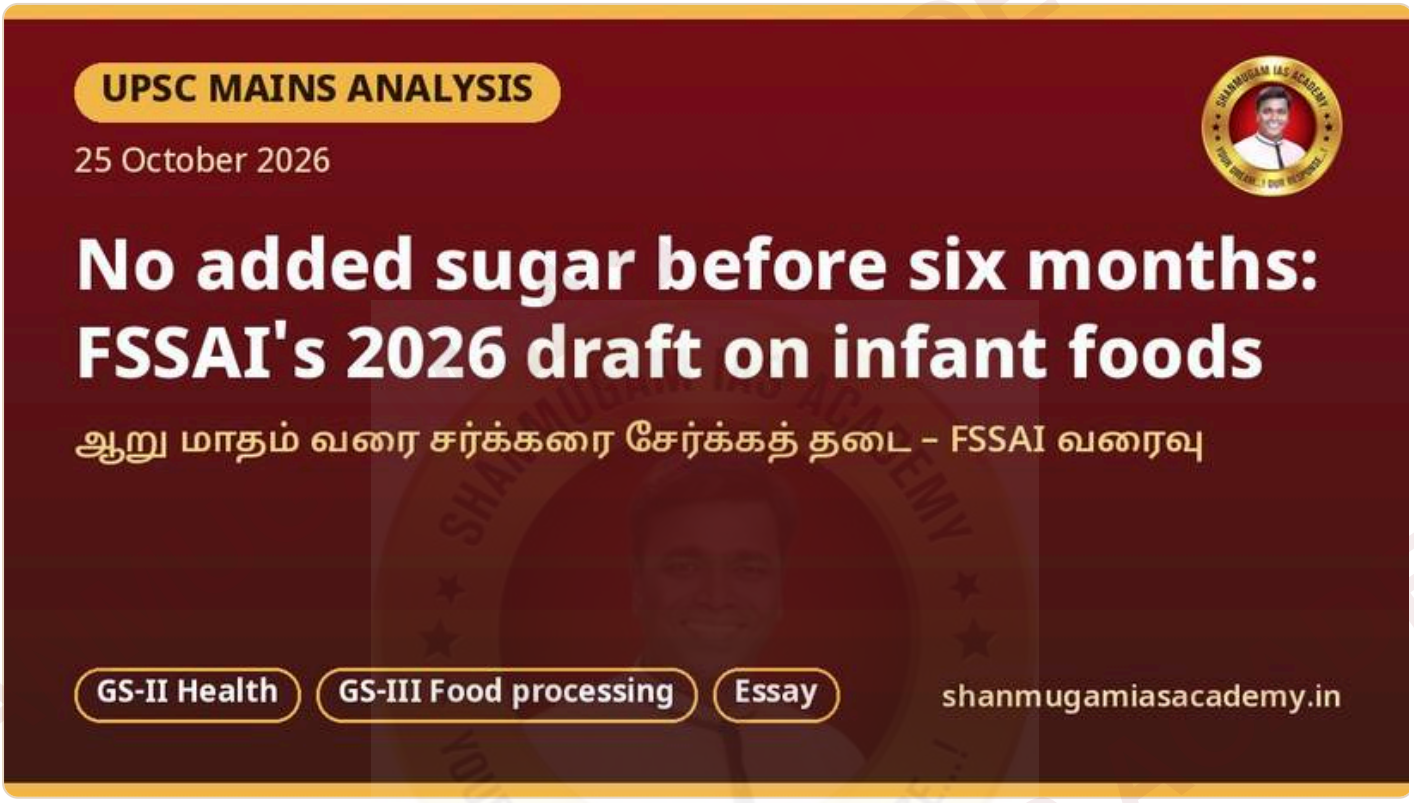
Mains Analysis: No added sugar before six months – what FSSAI's 2026 draft on infant foods means

Health, Food Safety · 25 October 2026 · https://www.shanmugamiasacademy.in/upsc-mains-analysis



Context

On 16 October 2026 the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) published the draft **Food Safety and Standards (Foods for Infant Nutrition) Amendment Regulations, 2026**. It adds a proviso: *sucrose and fructose shall not be added in products intended for infants up to the age of six months*. Stakeholders have 60 days to send objections and suggestions. The draft revives a debate that began in 2024, when an international NGO report on added sugar in baby cereals sold in India led the Central Consumer Protection Authority to ask FSSAI to examine the issue.

> **GS mapping:** GS-II – Health; Government policies and interventions; Issues relating to children. GS-III – Food processing (regulation). Essay – public health, the role of the State.

Background

- **Law:** Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 – FSSAI frames regulations under it. Infant foods are governed by the **Foods for Infant Nutrition Regulations, 2020** (products for infants and young children up to 24 months).
- **Present position:** the 2020 regulations did not prohibit added sucrose or fructose outright; the draft closes this for the 0–6 month group.
- **Marketing law:** the **Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (IMS) Act, 1992** (amended 2003) bans the promotion of infant milk substitutes and infant foods.
- **Global norms:** WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and no added sugars for infants and young children; the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (1981) restricts promotion.

Why it matters – key dimensions

Dimension	Argument
Health	Early exposure to sweetness shapes lifelong taste preference, raises the risk of dental caries and is linked to later overweight. NFHS-5 (2019–21) recorded 3.4% of children under five as overweight, up from 2.1% in NFHS-4, even as stunting persists – the "double burden" of malnutrition.
Breastfeeding	About 64% of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed (NFHS-5). Sweetened products can make substitutes more attractive and weaken breastfeeding – the very goal of the IMS Act and POSHAN Abhiyaan.
Consumer rights	Parents cannot judge sugar content from front-of-pack claims; a clear prohibition is easier to enforce than "limits". Different recipes for different countries erode trust.
Industry	Reformulation, shelf-life and taste concerns; but one rule for all keeps a level playing field.
Regulatory design	The draft covers only 0–6 months and only two sugars. Products for 6–24 months (cereal-based complementary foods) – where the 2024 controversy arose – remain outside, as do honey, syrups and malt.

Challenges

- **Narrow scope:** few commercial products target 0–6 months; the larger 6–24 month market is untouched.

- **Substitution:** manufacturers may switch to other caloric sweeteners not named in the proviso.
- **Enforcement capacity:** testing laboratories, sampling and State food-safety staff need strengthening.
- **Labelling gap:** "no added sugar" claims and front-of-pack labelling for infant foods are still evolving.

Way forward

1. Extend the prohibition to **all added sugars and sweeteners** (including honey, syrups and malt extracts) in foods for children up to 24 months.
2. Mandate a clear **"total sugars / added sugars"** declaration and ban health or "growth" claims on infant foods.
3. Enforce the **IMS Act** against digital and influencer marketing.
4. Expand testing infrastructure and publish surveillance results regularly.
5. Back the rule with **behaviour change**: lactation support at the workplace (creche provision under the Maternity Benefit Act) and ASHA / Anganwadi counselling under POSHAN Abhiyaan.

> **Conclusion:** The draft is a welcome first step that treats the first six months as a critical window. Its real value will depend on widening it to the complementary-food age (6–24 months) and on enforcement – so that "protecting the first 1,000 days" becomes a regulatory reality, not just a nutrition slogan.

Mains practice question

Q. "Regulating what infants eat is as important as regulating what adults eat." Examine the significance of FSSAI's 2026 draft on added sugars in infant foods and suggest measures to make infant-food regulation more effective. *(15 marks, 250 words)*

Answer framework: Introduction – the draft and its trigger (one line on the 2024 controversy) · Body – (a) health and breastfeeding significance with NFHS-5 data, (b) consumer-rights angle, (c) limitations: 0–6 months only, two sugars only, (d) enforcement and marketing issues · Way forward – four or five points above · Conclusion – use the faculty-view line below.

Prelims pointers

- FSSAI – statutory body under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.
- Foods for Infant Nutrition Regulations, 2020 cover products up to 24 months of age.
- IMS Act, 1992 (amended 2003) – bans promotion of infant milk substitutes and infant foods.
- Sucrose = glucose + fructose (a disaccharide); lactose is milk sugar.

Asked before in UPSC Mains (PYQ)

Official question-paper wording, with how this analysis helps you answer it.

GS-II 2024 10 marks

"Poverty and malnutrition create a vicious cycle, adversely affecting human capital formation. What steps can be taken to break the cycle?"

How this helps: use the "first 1,000 days" and breastfeeding arguments as concrete steps to break the cycle.

GS-II 2024 15 marks

"In a crucial domain like the public healthcare system the Indian State should play a vital role to contain the adverse impact of marketisation of the system. Suggest some measures through which the State can enhance the reach of public healthcare at the grassroots level."

How this helps: the FSSAI draft is an example of the State containing market harm; add "commercial determinants of health".

GS-III 2021 15 marks

"What are the salient features of the National Food Security Act, 2013? How has the Food Security Bill helped in eliminating hunger and malnutrition in India?"

How this helps: use the "double burden of malnutrition" point – food security today also means food quality, not only quantity.

Faculty view – looking ahead (Shanmugam IAS Academy)

Read this draft as a turning point: India's nutrition policy is moving from **"feeding more"** (calories, hunger) to **"feeding right"** (quality, lifelong health). The same household can now have an undernourished child and a diabetic parent – the ICMR-INDIAB study (2023) estimated about 101 million people with diabetes in India. Prevention therefore has to begin with the first bite.

- **A term that will lift your answer:** "commercial determinants of health" – how product design, marketing and pricing shape what people eat. Expect UPSC to frame GS-II and Essay questions on regulating markets for public health.
- **What to watch next:** (1) whether the final rule extends to 6–24 months and to all sweeteners, (2) front-of-pack labelling for packaged foods, (3) IMS Act enforcement on social media. Use these as tests of the reform.
- **Ready-made conclusion line:** "Healthy adults are made in the first 1,000 days; regulation must begin where habits begin."

Sources: FSSAI draft notification, Food Safety and Standards (Foods for Infant Nutrition) Amendment Regulations, 2026 (Gazette, 16-10-2026); NFHS-5 National Fact Sheet (MoHFW); ICMR-INDIAB study (2023); WHO infant and young child feeding guidance. Original analysis by Shanmugam IAS Academy.

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