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Companies lose appetite for junk food ads

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NEW DELHI: A group of food & beverages (F&B) companies, including Hindustan Unilever, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Kellogg's, have come together

to stop marketing junk food to children below 12 years to help check the rising menace of obesity.

They will introduce an Indian version of the EU Pledge, a pact signed by their parent organisations in 2007.

Under the EU Pledge, 11 companies, which account for more than half of the F&B advertisement spend in Europe, had decided to stop running ads targeting children on television, print and the internet, and selling junk food such as chocolate, chips and cola in primary schools.

"In India, HUL, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Kellogg's met recently to reinforce their commitment to the cause," an HUL spokesman said. The Indian pledge will take a concrete shape later this year. The objective of the forum is to adopt self-regulatory measures and reinforce codes of conduct to children on a common ground.

Other signatories of the EU Pledge, such as Nestle, are expected to join the initiative soon. The rest — Groupe Danone, Burger King, Mars, Ferrero, General Mills and Kraft — which either have a small presence in India, or are not present here, may come on board as their operations gain size in the country, company officials said.

The Indian companies have already adopted independent internal voluntary guidelines, in line with their parent companies to deal with issues such as advertising responsibly to children.

Indian marketers are for the first time joining hands to formulate common guidelines for responsible advertising to children under 12 years of age, and deal with larger health concerns such as obesity.

The move is expected to have huge repercussions in India. Take Nestle. All advertising for its flagship 2-minute noodle brand Maggi, for example, now shows the entire family, instead of only a bunch of under 12-year-olds and a mother. The move is in line with its parent Nestle SA's recent pledge that it will advertise to under-12 children only those products that meet nutritional guidelines across global markets.

According to a study published by the International Journal of Paediatric Obesity, 10% children in Europe will be obese by 2010, owing to changes in diet and decrease in physical activity. The Asian average could triple to 5.3% from 1.5%. In the Middle East, the figure is expected to rise to 11.5% while in North and South America, the obesity levels could increase to 15.2%.

In India, existing associations of advertisers include the Indian Society of Advertisers (ISA), 3As of I (Advertising Agencies Association of India) and industry watchdog Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). But there has been no common platform for companies to jointly address concerns like obesity and responsible advertising to children.

One of the most significant measures taken by the EU Pledge was to stop marketing products in primary schools, except in cases where they have been requested by respective school administrations for educational purposes. The companies agreed to get their respective efforts at reduced marketing, aimed at children to be independently verified from January 2009.