A drive for good nutrition among pregnant women and children in a southern Assam district has been given a gooseberry candy twist. This follows a report that the targeted groups find the prescribed iron-folic acid tablets repulsive.

According to the 2015 National Family Health Survey, 47.2% of the women of reproductive age in Hailakandi were anaemic. The district, thus, has the most anaemic children below 5 years, adolescents and women of reproductive age in Assam.

But mothers, pregnant women and children in the district, data reveal, consume only 24.3% of the total iron-folic acid tablets that the district receives and distributes. “The tablets given to these groups are often not consumed as they feel nauseated or have constipation issues. There are also myths that these tablets will kill them or make them incapable of conceiving,” District Deputy Commissioner Keerthi Jalli told The Hindu.

**Amla, jaggery combo**
To get around the problem while launching *Poshan Maah*, or nutrition month, a few days ago, the district administration decided to produce roundish amla-gur candies with a dose of salt. Nutritionists involved in the campaign said amla, or gooseberry, is rich in Vitamin C and antioxidants, while gur, or jaggery, is rich in iron, vital vitamins and minerals that boost the immune system.

“The gooseberry candy is a home-made recipe, and is provided alongside iron-folic acid tablets as behavioural change in nutritious eating is a slow process. If women and children avoid the tablet, they can get the required vitamin and mineral inputs through the improvised delicacy of which ingredients are available locally,” Ms. Jalli said. The candy is cost-effective too, she said. Anganwadi workers, supervisors and mothers have been engaged to prepare and distribute the ‘laddoos’ with the ingredients given by the district authorities.

“This is a novel initiative that should go a long way in checking anaemia that increases the risk during pregnancy and at childbirth, besides resulting in low birth weight and malnourished children,” Anganwadi worker Labiba Begum Barlaskar said.

About 32.5% of the children aged below five in Hailakandi are underweight. The average figure for Assam is 30%.