

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Initiatives to Reduce Salt and Sugar in Food

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the Government's initiatives to reduce salt and sugar in food.

BACKGROUND

2. Salt and sugar are closely related to health. Excessive dietary salt intake will increase the risk of developing hypertension, stroke and coronary heart diseases. Excessive dietary sugar intake will lead to obesity and dental caries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has come up with recommendations on the limits of the daily intake of salt and sugar¹.

3. Healthy eating is one of the keys to reducing the intake of salt and sugar in food, among other things. It has always been the Government's policy to encourage and promote healthy eating. In this regard, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Department of Health (DH) have done a lot of publicity and education work to promote healthy eating habits through collaboration with the food trade, schools and other stakeholders. For example, DH launched the "EatSmart@school.hk" (ESS) in 2006 to promote healthy eating at schools, and launched the EastSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign in 2008 to encourage and assist restaurants to provide dishes with more fruit and vegetables and less oil, salt and sugar. The CFS launched the "Reduce Salt, Sugar, Oil. We Do!" programme calling for food premises which are the Food Safety Charter signatories to follow the CFS' advice on reducing salt and sugar in preparing food. The Nutrition Labelling Scheme, which was a mandatory scheme introduced in 2008, aims to facilitate consumers to make healthier food choices and encourage food manufacturers to apply sound nutrition principles in the

¹ For salt, WHO recommends a daily intake limit of 5 g, with an voluntary interim target adopted by Member States of 30% relative reduction in population intake of salt (i.e. a reduction from 10 g to 7 g for Hong Kong) to be achieved by 2025. For sugar, WHO strongly recommends that free sugars (according to the definition of WHO, free sugars mean monosaccharides and disaccharides added to foods by the manufacturer, cook, or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, and fruit juices) should make up less than 10% of total energy intake per day, which translates into less than 50 g of free sugars per day of for someone having a 2 000 kcal diet.

formulation of foods.

4. The Government attaches much importance to the reduction of salt and sugar in food and is determined to taking this forward proactively in close partnership with the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (CRSS), the International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Dietary Sodium and Sugar² (IAP) and other stakeholders. In this regard, the Government set up two advisory bodies to advise on salt and sugar reduction measures from overseas and local perspectives respectively, namely the IAP which was set up in 2014 and the CRSS which was set up in 2015³. The IAP has provided very useful insights to the Government and the CRSS on the experiences of other places in reducing salt and sugar in food. The CRSS has convened many meetings and discussions to solicit the views of relevant stakeholders including food manufacturers and the catering industry, including the issue of product reformulation which is a complicated and lengthy process.

PRIORITY INITIATIVES

5. Changing dietary habits are never easy. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Government all along in promoting healthy eating, the majority of our population is not yet fully conscious of the health hazard of taking too much salt and sugar. In charting the way forward to reduce salt and sugar in food, we are mindful of the need to adapt the experiences of other jurisdictions to Hong Kong's circumstances so that the measures are down-to-earth, well-understood and considered feasible rather than rejected outright.

6. Having regard to overseas experiences, our communications with the relevant stakeholders as well as the actual circumstances of Hong Kong, both the Government and the CRSS are of the view that a pragmatic, step-by-step and contextualized approach should be adopted, starting from aspects which are more achievable first before tackling the more difficult ones. Therefore, maximizing support with emphasis on raising the awareness of the general public and the trade on the health risks of taking too much salt and sugar is an appropriate first step. It helps lay a sound foundation for inducing future changes to the dietary habits. Also, with the industry's voluntary participation to progressively lower the content of salt and sugar in food, the public will gradually adapt to the changes in flavor and be receptive to a

² The International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Sodium and Sugar was renamed as the International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in 2015. It comprises five renowned public health experts from Australia, Canada, Finland, the Mainland and the United Kingdom.

³ The Chairperson of the CRSS is Mr Bernard Charnwut Chan. The Vice-chairperson is Dr Mak Sin-ping, the first Controller of the Centre for Food Safety. Members of the Committee comprise representatives from different sectors, including healthcare professional organizations, the food trade, the relevant academia, the media, consumers and the education sector.

relatively healthier diet. This will also allow time for the industry to make adjustment accordingly, thus, reducing the impact of the measures on their actual operation.

7. In practical terms, the CRSS has advised the Government to further cultivate a culture of low-salt-and-sugar diets in the community along the three directions of ‘starting from an early age’ through promoting healthy eating in preprimary institutions and primary schools, enhancing transparency of information through the proposed front-of-pack low-salt-and-sugar labelling scheme for pre-packaged food to help consumers make better choices, and strengthening publicity and education.

Starting from an early age

8. The CRSS proposes to capitalize on DH’s “StartSmart@school.hk” Campaign (SSS) targeting at pre-primary institutions (PPIs). The SSS has been organizing Dietetic Workshops for PPIs’ teachers and chefs both in October/November and in April/May in every school year. For the 2016/17 school year, DH has put emphasis on the knowledge and recommendations of salt and sugar intake, foods that are of high salt and sugar content, as well as ways to prepare and cook “low salt and sugar” dishes in these workshops. Four new seasonal meal planners with “low salt and sugar” dishes are being uploaded onto the “StartSmart@school.hk” website. To facilitate PPIs to provide healthy dishes during festival celebrations, meal planners for Mid-Autumn Festival, Christmas, Chinese New Year and Easter are also being uploaded. These festival meal planners will also emphasize on “low salt/sugar” and new simple recipes will also be provided. DH is also encouraging PPI teachers and chefs to share healthy recipes that meet “low salt /sugar” criteria to be uploaded to the “StartSmart@school.hk” website.

Enhancing transparency of information

9. The CRSS is considering a front-of-pack low-salt-low-sugar labeling scheme for pre-packaged food, which will help consumers identify low-salt-low-sugar products more easily and conveniently. The scheme may also serve as a catalyst for the industry to provide more varieties of low-salt-low-sugar products for consumers. The CRSS and CFS will liaise with the industry to work out the guidelines and details of the scheme, taking into account the industry’s concerns on operational and technical matters. As a precursor to the front-of-pack low-salt-low-sugar labeling scheme, the CRSS will organize a label competition and a slogan-and-poster design competition in 2017 to raise public awareness.

10. Conscious individuals may find information on the “calorie” counts of food useful to them in choosing what to eat. In response to the CRSS’ recommendations and with the support and concerted efforts of the Hospital Authority (HA), more than 80% of the staff canteens of public hospitals, i.e. 20 canteens have implemented the “calorie” indication pilot scheme and indicated the calorie of selective dishes on their menus. Implementing the “calorie” indication scheme in the staff canteens of public hospitals has the positive effect of encouraging other restaurants to join the scheme. Some operators of these canteens are leading restaurant chain groups. These restaurants chain groups may leverage on the experience from the staff canteens which they operate and implement similar measures in the other restaurants. This will lay the foundation for further expansion of the “calorie” indication pilot scheme. We will conduct consumer surveys to gauge whether the information on “calorie” counts may have effect on the behavioral changes of consumers and distill good practices and relevant experience for facilitating wider implementation of the “calorie” indication initiative.

Publicity and public education

11. The CFS has been organizing various publicity activities to raise public awareness on the importance of reducing dietary salt and sugar intake, encourage consumers to read nutrition labels as well as encourage the public to develop a healthy eating habit with less salt and sugar. Those activities include TV Announcements in the Public Interest (APIs), student competitions, seminars and talks. For example, the CFS co-organized the Junior Chefs’ Culinary Ideas of Salt and Sugar Reduction Competition with the Education Bureau, the CRSS, the Chinese Culinary Institute and the Committee on Home-School Co-operation in 2016, to encourage and promote creative low-salt-low sugar recipes designed by students and parents. The CFS launched a Facebook page, under the theme “Hong Kong’s Action on Salt and Sugar Reduction”. Also, the CFS conducted studies jointly with the Consumer Council on the nutrient contents, including salt and sugar contents, in popular local food items such as beverages and soups. The findings of those joint studies were published through the Consumer Council’s Choice Magazine.

12. To foster a health-conscious ambience at the district level and echo the priority initiatives proposed by the CRSS, the Food and Health Bureau is providing \$250,000 to each District Council (i.e. \$4.5 million for the 18 District Councils in total) to encourage district/local community groups to organize activities that bring home the health messages of reduced salt and sugar intake through food. We believe that the engagement of district and local community groups will help expedite behavioral change in favour of reducing salt and sugar intake through food.

WAY FORWARD

13. The above initiatives are just the first step to gradually reduce the intake of salt and sugar of Hong Kong people to the levels recommended by the WHO. The Government will continue to make reference to the recommendations of the IAP, the CRSS and WHO, as well as other relevant measures and experience in other places (including the effectiveness of the measures, the response from the industry and consumers' receptiveness), while giving full and thorough consideration to the local situation in order to explore and formulate sustainable salt and sugar reduction measures that are suitable for Hong Kong.

ADVICE SOUGHT

14. Members are invited to note and offer their views on the initiatives to reduce salt and sugar in food.

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