

For Information

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Reduction of Salt and Sugar Content in Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the efforts made by the Administration to reduce salt (sodium) and sugar content in food.

Background

2. The Administration has attached great importance to protecting the health of the general public. Diet and health are closely related. Excessive intake of nutrients (for example sodium and sugars) may lead to chronic diseases. Therefore, the Administration is concerned about the intake of nutrients by the general public.

3. Sodium is a mineral essential for maintaining the normal functioning of human body. It helps regulate the amount of fluid in the body and is important for the transmission of nerve impulses. However, excessive intake of sodium can be detrimental to health. Epidemiological studies have demonstrated that excessive intake of sodium will increase the risk of a wide range of chronic diseases, including hypertension, heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, stomach cancer and lowered bone density. In the case of hypertension, the Thematic Household Survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in the past five years revealed that the prevalence of diagnosed hypertension in Hong Kong has been on a rising trend from 9.3% in 2008 to 11% in 2011/12. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends an adult to consume less than 2 000mg sodium (i.e. 5g of salt) daily from food to reduce blood pressure. In spite of this, as revealed in an earlier report, the Hong Kong population in general consume 10g of salt per person per day, which is twice the level recommended by the WHO.

4. Sugars in food provide energy for the body (1g of sugars provides 4kcal). In particular, glucose serves as an energy source for the human brain. However, excessive intake of sugars may lead to excessive energy and increase the risk of overweight and obesity, which in turn increases the risk of heart diseases and other chronic diseases. In the Behavioural Risk Factor Survey conducted by the Department of Health (DH) in 2012, 36.6% of the population aged 18 to 64 were classified as overweight or obese (Body Mass Index (BMI) \geq 23.0), including 18.8% who were classified as obese. A higher proportion of males (47.2%) than females (27.8%) were classified as overweight or obese, while people aged 45 to 54 had the highest rate (51.1%) of overweight or obesity. Excessive intake of sugars may also affect dental health. WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations suggest that the intake of free sugars¹ should be less than 10% of the daily energy intake. However, energy requirement varies, depending on age, gender, body weight and activity level. For example, an individual with a daily energy intake of 2 000kcal should limit the intake of free sugars to less than 50g/day.

5. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has been promoting the reduction of salt (sodium) and sugar content in food over the years through conducting risk assessment studies, implementing the Nutrition Labelling Scheme and collaborating with the food trade. In addition, campaigns launched by the DH, namely "EatSmart@school.hk", "EatSmart@restaurant.hk" and "StartSmart@school.hk", also encourage a healthy eating habit.

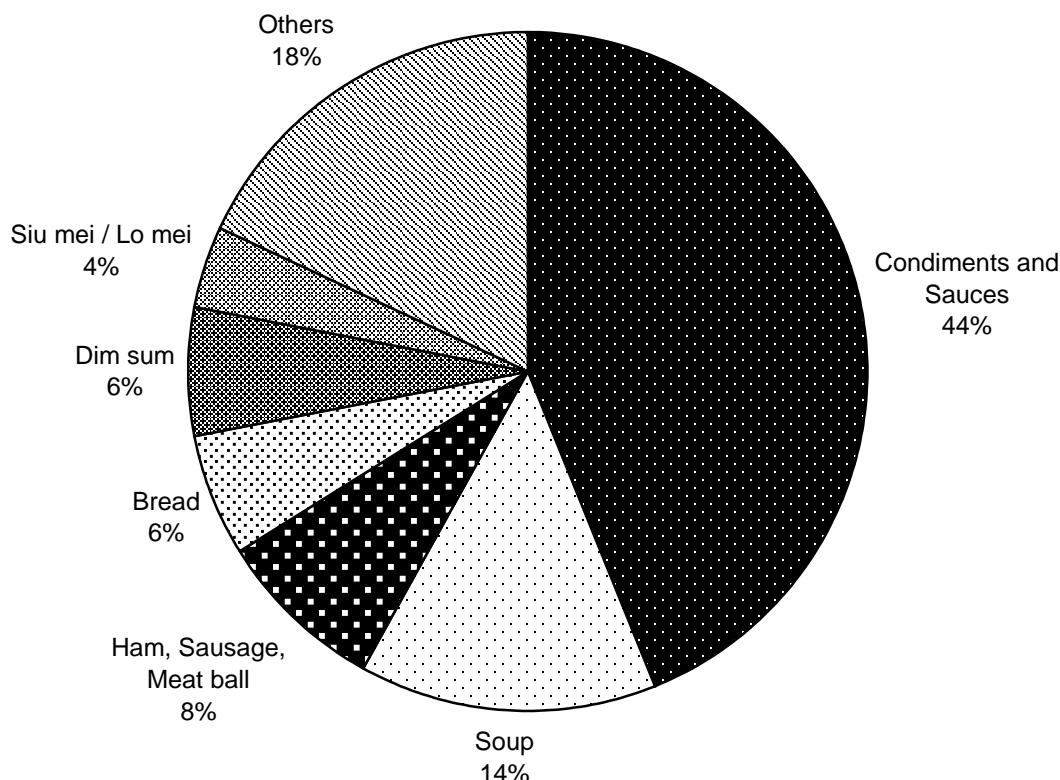
Studies on salt (sodium) and sugars in food

6. FEHD and its Centre for Food Safety (CFS) have in the past conducted a number of studies relating to salt (sodium) and sugars, some of which were in collaboration with the Consumer Council (Annex).

¹ Free sugars mean all mono- and di-saccharides added to foods by a manufacturer, cook or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrup and fruit juices in diets.

7. According to past studies, the major sources of sodium intake of the local population in descending order are from condiments and sauces (such as table salt, soy sauce, etc.), soup, processed meats (such as ham, sausage, meat ball, etc.), bread, and dim sum, etc. (see Figure below).

Figure: Estimated distribution of sodium intake from local diet



8. Regarding sugar contents, in 2009, CFS conducted a study on the nutrient contents of common non-prepackaged beverages and pre-packaged beverages in Hong Kong. It was revealed that the sugar contents of these beverages varied greatly, with relatively higher sugar contents in some non-prepackaged iced beverages (e.g. red bean icy drink, pineapple icy drink and tri-colour icy drink) and sour plum drink (>10g/100ml). In addition, among 80 samples of ready-to-drink pre-packaged beverages and powdered drink products, lactic acid beverages were found to contain the highest amount of sugars, with an amount of 16g/100g detected in one of the samples. Besides, the sugar content of some soft drinks, juice drinks and lemon tea was also a concern as some samples were found to contain a relatively high amount of sugars (13g/100g). Consumption of one can/pack (200 to 330ml)

of such product would account for about 50% to nearly 90% of the daily recommended intake limit for free sugars.

9. While the salt (sodium) and sugar contents vary across different kinds of food, differences are also found within the same kind of food, which means that there is room for salt (sodium) and sugar reduction in foods. Take the example of fried potatoes (e.g. french fries, hash browns), the sodium contents range from 370mg to 690mg per 100g of food. Another example is iced non-alcoholic beverages (e.g. iced lemon honey (less sweet) and red bean icy drink (regular)) where the sugar contents range from 5.3g to 12g per 100ml of beverages.

Nutrient Information Inquiry System

10. The Nutrient Information Inquiry System (NIIS), designed by CFS, is a web-based database, where information about sodium and sugar contents in a wide range of food items obtained from local studies and overseas databases (China, the USA, Australia and Thailand) is available for free. The trade can refer to NIIS to estimate the sodium and sugar contents in the ingredients during the manufacture of food. Consumers can make use of NIIS, especially the Food Nutrient Calculator, to monitor their intake of sodium and sugars and make healthy food choices.

Nutrition Labelling Scheme

11. The Nutrition Labelling Scheme (the Scheme) came into force in July 2010. The Scheme aims to -

- (a) assist consumers in making informed food choices;
- (b) encourage food manufacturers to apply sound nutrition principles in the formulation of foods; and
- (c) regulate misleading or deceptive labels and claims.

12. Apart from some exempted food items, all prepackaged foods must carry nutrition labels which include the information on energy content and 7 specified nutrients, namely, carbohydrates, protein, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and sugars (i.e. the “1+7”). The Scheme also covers

nutrition claims (which includes nutrient content claim, nutrient comparative claim and nutrient function claim). As stipulated in the Scheme, a product with a claim of “low sodium” shall contain not more than 120mg of sodium per 100g or ml of the food; and a product with a claim of “low sugars” shall contain not more than 5g of sugar per 100g or ml of the food.

Public Education and Publicity

13. CFS has been carrying out a variety of publicity and education programmes to enhance public understanding of the Scheme. Following the three-year Publicity and Education Campaign which ended in June 2011, CFS launched a two-year enhancement programme on nutrition labelling in July 2011 to sustain the effort in motivating behavioural changes among consumers in the use of nutrition information on labels.

14. CFS has, through various means such as the mass media, leaflets, talks, workshops, exhibitions, and award schemes, etc., publicised and educated the public on the use of nutrition labels to enable them to make suitable food choices. To facilitate the application of information on nutrition labels, an internet tool “Nutrition Label Widget” and a mobile application “Nutrition Calculator” have also been developed and made available for use and free download.

15. To enhance public awareness of the application of nutrition labelling and to echo the theme of World Health Day 2013 on high blood pressure, CFS will launch a publicity and education campaign on nutrition labelling in 2013 under the theme of reducing sodium intake. The objective of this campaign is to motivate behavioural changes among the public at large in choosing food with lower sodium by comparing the information on nutrition labels of pre-packaged foods. New Announcements in the Public Interest on television and radio, information leaflets and teaching kits will be produced, and public talks and workshops will be organised to enhance knowledge about nutrition labelling among the community and educational partners. Besides, CFS will continue to engage secondary schools and community organizations participating in the “Live it, Use it” Nutrition Labelling Promotion Award Scheme and the “Live it, Use it” Nutrition Labelling Fun Shopping Award Scheme in promoting the knowledge on and the application of nutrition labels.

Trade Guidelines and Working Groups

16. CFS issued the Trade Guidelines for Reducing Sodium in Foods and Trade Guidelines for Reducing Sugars and Fats in Foods in September and November 2012 respectively, with the aim of helping the food trade to produce and promote wholesome and safe products which have lower salt (sodium) or sugar content. The guidelines, which are applicable to all food traders producing and selling foods, are prepared after consultation with representatives from the trade and academia. CFS encourages restaurants and the food trade to follow the advices given in the guidelines.

17. Moreover, to strengthen the collaboration with the trade in promoting the reduction of salt (sodium) or sugars in food, CFS established the Working Group on Reducing Sodium in Food and the Working Group on Reducing Sugars in Pre-packaged Beverages respectively in 2013.

18. The first meeting of the Working Group on Reducing Sodium in Food was held in March 2013. Attendees of the meeting included representatives from local and multinational food manufacturers and suppliers, catering industry as well as academics. At the first meeting, members of the Working Group discussed the relationship between sodium and hypertension, main sources of sodium in local food, as well as overseas experience in reducing sodium in food. They also shared views on the reduction of sodium in respect of their trades and areas of work. They undertook to further examine feasible measures with their respective companies or association members. CFS encourages more representatives of the food manufacturing industry to participate in the future activities of the Working Group with a view to producing and promoting more varieties of food with lower sodium for the public to choose.

19. The first meeting of the Working Group on Reducing Sugars in Pre-packaged Beverages was held in February 2013 with the participation of representatives from beverage associations, beverage manufacturers and suppliers. The meeting discussed various strategies on the reduction of sugar intake from pre-packaged beverages. CFS will continue the work of the two Working Groups in 2013.

Advice Sought

20. Members are invited to note the efforts made by the Administration to reduce salt (sodium) and sugar content in food.

**Food and Health Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Centre for Food Safety
May 2013**

Previous studies relating to sodium and/or sugars in food conducted by the Centre for Food Safety

Study report	
1.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 17: Nutrient Values of Chinese Dim Sum (April 2005)
2.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 22: Nutrient Values of Indigenous Congee, Rice and Noodle Dishes (March 2006)
3.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 28: Nutrient Values of Fruit and Vegetables (June 2007)
4.	Joint Report with the Consumer Council: Sodium Content of Savoury Snacks in Hong Kong (March 2009)
5.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 33: Nutrient Contents of Common Non-prepackaged Beverages in Hong Kong (April 2009)
6.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 38: Trans Fatty Acids in Local Foods (III) (July 2009)
7.	Joint Report with the Consumer Council: Sugars Content of Prepackaged Non-alcoholic Beverages in Hong Kong (November 2009)
8.	Launching Article of Nutrition Labelling Series: Instant Noodles (March 2010)
9.	Article 2 of Nutrition Labelling Series: Canned Luncheon Meat, Canned Sardines and Prepackaged Sandwich Bread (April 2010)
10.	Article 4 of Nutrition Labelling Series: Crispy Chips (June 2010)
11.	Article 5 of Nutrition Labelling Series: Breakfast Cereal Products (July 2010)
12.	Risk Assessment Studies Report No. 49: Study on Sodium Content in Local Foods (September 2012)
13.	Joint Report with the Consumer Council: Trans Fatty Acids in Local Foods (2012) (December 2012)