

**For discussion
on 14 April 2015**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the relevant work of the Government and background information relating to the reduction of salt and sugar in food.

Background

2. In the 2015 Policy Agenda, the Government announced that it would devise and implement a strategic plan to reduce the intake of salt and sugar in food so as to promote a healthy diet.

3. Non-communicable diseases (“NCD”) are well recognised as the major public health challenge all over the world. Dietary sodium (salt) intake is closely related to the development of hypertension which in turn is a major risk factor for cardiovascular diseases. Higher sodium intake was also associated with higher risk of fatal stroke and coronary heart disease. Besides, excessive dietary sugar intake is associated with overweight/obesity and dental caries.

WHO’s Recommendations on Salt Reduction

4. The World Health Organisation (“WHO”) recommends adults to consume less than 5 g of salt daily for the reduction of blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and coronary heart disease. Decreased sodium intake in the population is a cost-effective public health intervention that could potentially reduce the burden of NCD on society. In the 66th World Health Assembly held in 2013, the WHO Member States adopted a set of nine voluntary global targets to be achieved by 2025 for the prevention and control of NCDs. One of these targets is a 30% relative reduction in mean population intake of salt. For Hong Kong, that means a reduction from 10 g to 7 g. WHO eventually recommends a daily intake limit of 5 g.

WHO's Recommendations on Sugar Reduction

5. According to WHO's recommendation issued in 2002, free sugars¹ should make up less than 10% of total energy intake per day. This translates into less than about 50 g of free sugars per day for someone having a 2000-Kcal diet. In March 2015, WHO issued a new set of guidelines with two strong recommendations: (i) a reduced intake of free sugars throughout the life course; and (ii) in both adults and children, reduce the intake of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake².

Hong Kong Situation

NCD Burden in Hong Kong

6. In Hong Kong, malignant neoplasms (31.3%), diseases of heart (13.4%) and cerebrovascular diseases (7.5%) together accounted for more than half of all registered deaths in 2013. According to a survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in 2011-12, prevalence of hypertension increased with age from less than 0.1% among persons aged 25 and below and 0.4% among persons aged 25-34, to 2.0%, 7.9%, 17.8%, 26.3% and 46.0% among persons aged 35-44, 45-54, 55-59, 60-64 and 65 and above, respectively. Overall speaking, 11.0% of the local population suffered from hypertension as told by practitioners of Western medicine.

7. In Hong Kong, consistently about two-fifths of adults aged 18-64 were classified as overweight and obese ($BMI \geq 23$) over the past decades. In 2014, the prevalence was 39.0%. The detection rate of overweight and obesity among primary school students increased from 16.1% in 1995/96 to 22.2% in 2008/09, falling gradually to 20.0% in 2013/14. For secondary school students, the corresponding detection rate increased from 13.2% in 1996/97 to 19.5% in 2013/14. Obesity increases the risk of developing certain chronic diseases.

¹ According to the definition of WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 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.

² In the new set of guidelines, WHO also makes a conditional recommendation and suggests a further reduction of the intake of free sugars to below 5% of total energy intake (this translates into less than 25 g of free sugars or 5 cube sugars per day for someone having a 2000-Kcal diet). The recommendation to further limit free sugars intake to less than 5% of total energy intake is based on very low quality evidence from ecological studies in which a positive dose-response relationship between free sugars intake and dental caries was observed at free sugars intake of less than 5% of total energy intake. According to WHO, policy-making will require substantial debate and involvement of various stakeholders for translating them into action.

Consumption of Salt and Sugar in Hong Kong

8. Local population-based studies on the dietary intake of salt or sugar among the general public are limited. It is estimated that the salt intake in adults could be as much as 10 g per day (twice the level recommended by WHO) based on some local research studies. Since they were conducted years ago and/or focused on a subgroup of population³, more updated information of the general population is required to reflect the current situation. Based on available data from the Centre for Food Safety (CFS), it is estimated that major food groups contributing to sodium intake of the adult population in a descending order are condiment and sauce (44%), followed by soup (14%), ham/sausage/meatball (8%), bread (6%), dim sum (6%) and siu mei/ lo mei (4%).

9. On the other hand, it is estimated that the mean intake of total sugar among the local adults is 53 g per day based on data collected from the dietary studies conducted by CFS. Based on available data from CFS, it is estimated that 32% of total sugar intake is from non-alcoholic beverages, which consist of carbonated drinks, tea and fruit and vegetable juices/juice drinks.

Salt and Sugar Content in Food in Hong Kong

10. In order to have an overview of the nutrient content of food available in the local market, including prepackaged and non-prepackaged items, CFS has conducted a number of risk assessment studies on nutrients (including salt and sugar) since 2006. The studies revealed that salt and sugar contents vary across different kinds of food, with differences also found within the same kind of food, which means that there is room for salt and sugar reduction in foods. Take the example of fried potatoes (e.g. French fries, hash browns), the sodium contents range from 370 mg to 690 mg per 100 g of food. Another example is iced non-alcoholic beverages (e.g. iced lemon honey (less sweet) and red bean icy drink (regular)) with the sugar contents ranging from 5.3 g to 12 g per 100 ml.

11. Recently, the Department of Health (DH) released the results of “Nutrient Testing of School Lunch in Primary Schools in Hong Kong 2013”, which revealed that in spite of improvements in some nutrient contents of lunchboxes for primary 1-3 students, the lunchboxes were yet to meet all the nutrition recommendations. Specifically for sodium content, despite a substantial drop (-19%) in sodium (per 100 g) as compared to a similar survey in 2007, the sodium contents in almost all samples (99%) still exceeded the recommended intake per meal (≥ 319 mg sodium) for junior primary school

³ These two local research studies were conducted in 1995-96 and 2011 respectively.

students. Another study jointly conducted by CFS and the Consumer Council on the nutrient content of children's meals also revealed that salt and sugar contents in some children meals from restaurants were high.

Hong Kong's Action on Salt and Sugar Reduction

12. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and DH have all along been promoting an eating habit based on less salt and sugar through collaboration with food trade, schools and other stakeholders, and have done a lot of publicity and education work in this regard.

13. People in Hong Kong dine out quite often. Restaurants certainly play an important role in helping the public to practice healthy eating, including serving foods with reduced salt and sugar content. CFS recently launched a new campaign "Reduce salt, sugar, oil. We do! (減鹽、糖、油，我做!)" for signatories of Food Safety Charter. The aims of this campaign are to generate patrons' demand for reducing the use of salt, sugar and oil in food prepared in restaurants, and to encourage chefs to reduce the use of salt, sugar and oil when preparing dishes by making reference to relevant CFS guidelines. On the other hand, "EatSmart@restaurant.hk (有營食肆)" Campaign under DH requires participating restaurants to provide at least five EatSmart dishes, consisting of both "More Fruit and Vegetables" and "3 Less"⁴ dishes, in accordance with the nutritional benchmarks established by the campaign.

14. Building a healthy eating habit from a young age is very important in terms of healthy growth and prevention of chronic disease down the road. DH launched the "EatSmart@school.hk (健康飲食在校園)" Campaign in the school year 2006/07. The campaign aims to cultivate healthy eating practices, to facilitate the supply of healthy lunches and snacks at school and to strengthen nutrition education and publicity. To assist schools and parents to choose an appropriate school lunch supplier, DH developed a "Handbook of Selection of Lunch Suppliers" and "Nutritional Guidelines on Lunch for Students" for schools' reference. The objectives of this set of Guidelines are (a) to achieve energy balance and a healthy weight; (b) to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables; (c) to limit intake of total fats; (d) to limit intake of sugar; and (e) to limit intake of salt. DH will continue to provide necessary advice and assistance to lunch suppliers for improving the nutritional quality of school lunch.

15. FEHD also promotes the reduction of salt and sugar in food to members

⁴ "3 Less" means that the dishes have less fat or oil, salt and sugar.

of the public and the trade through a host of activities via different channels and platforms. Health promotion messages are delivered to members of the public and the trade via television and radio announcements, talks and seminars, and social media.

Strategies for Reducing the Intake of Salt and Sugar in Food

16. In view of the increasing NCD burden in Hong Kong, the Government considers it necessary to strengthen the work with respect to reduction in salt and sugar intake as this will reduce the chance of getting NCD. In this regard, the Government announced the establishment of a Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (“the Committee”) (Annex) in March 2015 which is responsible for making recommendations to the Secretary for Food and Health on the formulation of policy directions and work plans to reduce the intake of salt and sugar by the public. Members of the Committee comprise representatives from different sectors, including healthcare professional organisations, the food trade, the relevant academia, the media, consumers and the education sector⁵.

17. The Committee held its first meeting on March 27. At the meeting, members were briefed on the relationship between the amount of salt and sugar intake and health, local situation as well as overseas measures and experiences in promoting the reduction of salt and sugar. The Committee endorsed the Government's objectives and considered that to successfully promote the reduction in salt and sugar content of food in Hong Kong, the Government, food trade and consumers should work together to gradually reduce the amount of salt and sugar in food to the levels recommended by WHO so that consumers could slowly get used to a light diet, rather than trying to achieve a drastic reduction across the board. The Committee also considered that the support of the trade should first be sought through voluntary means and advocated a multi-pronged approach, through public education, to gradually raising consumer awareness of healthy eating.

18. The Committee held a lively discussion on how actual work in sugar and salt reduction should be carried out. Members discussed four work areas which could be considered as priorities, i.e. reduction of salt content in

⁵ The Government also continues to appoint the five renowned public health experts from the Mainland and overseas (Professor Norman Campbell from Canada, Professor Graham MacGregor from the United Kingdom, Professor Bruce Neal from Australia, Professor Pekka Puska from Finland and Professor Zhao Wenhua from the Mainland) as members of the International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (formerly known as International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Dietary Sodium and Sugars in Hong Kong). They will share successful international experiences in promoting the reduction of salt and sugar in food to tie in with the work of the above-mentioned Committee.

condiments and sauces, reduction of sugar content in prepackaged beverages (non-alcoholic), working with the restaurant chains to reduce salt and sugar content in food, as well as collaboration with lunch suppliers and Parents and Teachers Associations (PTAs) to reduce salt and sugar content in school lunch boxes. The Committee plans to engage and collaborate with major food manufacturers, large restaurants, schools, PTAs, and other key stakeholders.

19. The Committee recommended enhancing public awareness of the health impact of excessive intake of salt and sugar through an effective promotion strategy. In 2015, CFS will promote a healthy diet of low salt and low sugar among the public and the trade based on the theme "Hong Kong's Action on Salt and Sugar Reduction". In the coming months, the focus of public education and publicity efforts of CFS and DH will be to highlight the impact of excessive intake of salt and sugar on health. Relevant messages will be disseminated through television and radio announcements, media interviews (including print media), leaflets, posters, websites, Facebook pages, mobile apps, roving exhibitions, lectures and seminars.

20. Given the importance of data to the formulation of effective strategy for the reduction of salt and sugar, the Government will successively launch a number of baseline studies (including salt and sugar intake in Hong Kong; the salt and sugar content of food in the local market; and public knowledge, attitude and behaviour in relation to salt and sugar). The studies will be completed successively starting from 2016. The Committee recognised the importance of data and would consider additional data acquisition studies, depending on future work progress.

21. Looking ahead, the Committee will follow up the implementation of the work mentioned above, and establish various working groups which will further discuss the recommendations and particulars put forward at the meeting and report progress to the Committee.

Advice sought

22. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper and offer advice.

**Food and Health Bureau
Centre for Food Safety, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health**

April 2015

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