

**For discussion  
on 14 November 2017**

**Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene**

**Initiatives on the reduction of salt and sugar in food**

**Purpose**

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

**Harmful effect of excessive intake of salt and sugar**

2. Salt and sugar intake is closely related to health. Excessive sodium intake will increase the risk of hypertension, fatal stroke and coronary heart disease. Sugar intake is a determinant of body weight and dental caries.

**Recommendations of the World Health Organisation**

3. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has set guidelines on the daily intake of salt and sugar for adults. WHO recommends adults to consume less than 5 g of salt daily (i.e. slightly less than 1 level teaspoon of salt)<sup>1</sup>. WHO recommends that free sugar<sup>2</sup> should make up less than 10% of total energy intake per day for both adults and children. This translates into less than 50 g of free sugar (i.e. about 10 sugar cubes) per day for someone having a 2000-Kcal diet.

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<sup>1</sup> WHO recommends that the mean population intake of salt shall be reduced by 30% by 2025. For Hong Kong, that means a reduction from 10 g to 7 g.

<sup>2</sup> Free sugar means monosaccharides and disaccharides added to food by the manufacturers, cooks, or consumers, plus sugar naturally present in honey, syrups, and fruit juices.

## **Challenges of salt and sugar reduction**

4. To reduce the overall intake of salt and sugar of the local population, we would need all of the people in the society to get personally involved and take action to reduce the salt and sugar content of food as well as reduce the dietary intake of salt and sugar. In other words, not only should members of the community be aware that too much salt and sugar is harmful to health whereas less salt and sugar is beneficial to health, they also need to apply this knowledge into action.

5. It is challenging to make everyone accept the low-salt-and-sugar dietary culture. In general, food that is relatively salty and sweet is easier to arouse people's appetite. This is true not only to children, but also adults. Once we are adapted to relatively salty and sweet food, it would not be easy for us to accept food that is relatively light in taste. It takes time and determination to change our palate and habit. Parents and schools play a pivotal role in helping children to develop healthy eating habit when they are really young. For persons who are receptive to less-salt-and-sugar diet, it matters as to whether there is enough low-salt-and-sugar food at reasonable price in the market and whether restaurants are willing to cook with less salt and sugar. Therefore, the support of the industry (including the food manufacturers, importers, retailers, restaurants operators and chefs) is very important.

6. The Government attaches much importance to the reduction of salt and sugar intake of Hong Kong people. It set up the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (CRSS) in March 2015 to make 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 CRSS comprise representatives from different sectors, including healthcare professional bodies, food trade, academia of the relevant disciplines, the media, the Consumer Council and the education sector. Also, the Government appointed five renowned public health experts from the Mainland and overseas as members of the International Advisory Panel on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food to share successful international experiences in promoting the reduction of salt and sugar in food.

## **Measures to promote a low-salt-low-sugar dietary culture**

7. We cannot expect the public to change their dietary habits overnight. Considering the actual circumstances of Hong Kong, both the Government and CRSS are of the view that a step-by-step approach should be adopted, starting from aspects which are more achievable first before tackling the more difficult ones. The first and foremost task is to promote a culture of low-salt-and-sugar diet, which will see the public gradually change from a high-salt-and-sugar diet to a relatively healthier one. Such a change will generate the demand for low-salt-and-sugar food and stimulate proactive response from the food trade. In practical terms, CRSS has advised the Government to work with all of the stakeholders to further cultivate a culture of low-salt-and-sugar diet in the community along the three directions of “starting from an early age”, “enhancing transparency of information”, and “strengthening publicity and education”.

### ***“Starting from an early age”***

8. Developing a low-salt-and-sugar dietary habit from young age is conducive to growing up healthy and effective in preventing chronic diseases afterwards. The Department of Health (DH) has enhanced the measures on promoting healthy eating at kindergartens and child care centres through the “StartSmart@school.hk” Campaign. In 2016/17 school year, DH strengthened the emphasis on salt and sugar reduction in the workshops regularly organised for cooks and teachers, including enhancing their knowledge on salt and sugar intake and food which is high in sugar and salt, and providing suggestions on how to prepare tasty and yet “low-salt-and-sugar” diets. In addition, seasonal and festive “less-salt-and-sugar” sample menus are uploaded onto the website of the “StartSmart@school.hk” Campaign for pre-primary institutions’ reference. Those institutions are encouraged to share their cooking methods and tips via the “Recipe Sharing” platform on the website, while parents and children are also encouraged to cook “low-salt-and-sugar” dishes together.

### **“Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches”**

9. DH has launched the “Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches” from this school year, under which 13 participating school lunch suppliers have been

supplying sodium-reduced lunches to the students in about 440 primary schools territory-wide starting from September this year. The suppliers concerned will submit recipes of those school lunches to DH for assessing the sodium level and level of sodium reduction. As at 1 November 2017, participating lunch suppliers have committed to provide over 450 sodium-reduced lunch options for schools' consideration in the 2017/18 school year, with the average level of sodium reduction being 8 per cent. A phased sodium reduction approach helps students gradually adapt to the change in palate and increase their receptiveness to less sodium in food<sup>3</sup>.

### ***“Enhancing transparency of information”***

10. There are a great variety of food available in the market. Also, restaurants offer all sorts of dishes. It is not easy for the consumers to identify low-salt-and-sugar products or relatively healthy dishes. Enhancing the transparency of information will help consumers make a more healthy choice.

### **“Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products**

11. The Food and Health Bureau, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) and CRSS jointly launched the “Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products in October this year. The labels can be displayed on all prepackaged food products that are in compliance with the definitions of “low salt”, “no salt”, “low sugar” and “no sugar” under the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Cap. 132W). The Scheme has received support from business associations and the trade<sup>4</sup>. We expect that prepackaged food products with such labels will be available in the market soon, enabling consumers to make wiser choices. We also hope to encourage the trade operators to provide more low-salt

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<sup>3</sup> DH will conduct the Nutrient Testing of School Lunches in Primary Schools in Hong Kong jointly with the Centre for Food Safety in early 2018. School lunch samples would be collected randomly from all primary schools in Hong Kong for nutrient testing to examine the amount of energy and nutrient content including sodium. The testing results would be useful in reviewing the measures needed to achieve the sodium reduction target.

<sup>4</sup> The Federation of Hong Kong Industries, the Chinese Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Food Council, GS1 Hong Kong, PARKnSHOP (HK) Limited, Coca-Cola China Limited and Vitasoy International Holdings Ltd. have supported the Scheme.

and low-sugar food products for the public. In addition, CFS has set up a dedicated page on the “Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products” on its website. Besides providing details on the Scheme, the dedicated page lists the prepackaged food products with the labels for the public’s reference.

#### “Calorie” indication pilot scheme

12. With the support and concerted efforts of the Hospital Authority, the “calorie” indication pilot scheme has been implemented at the staff canteens of public hospitals since 2016. At present, more than 80 per cent of the staff canteens of public hospitals, i.e. 20 canteens, have indicated the calorie counts of all dishes<sup>5</sup> on their menus. Implementing the scheme in the staff canteens of public hospitals first has the positive effect of encouraging other restaurants to follow because a considerable number of the operators of these canteens are leading restaurant chain groups. These restaurant chain groups may leverage on the experience from those staff canteens which they operate and implement similar measures in their other restaurants. This will lay the foundation for further expansion of the “calorie” indication pilot scheme.

#### ***“Strengthening publicity and education”***

13. There is still insufficient public awareness of salt and sugar reduction. We see the need to enhance publicity and education efforts. The Government and CRSS have carried out various publicity initiatives in promoting less salt and sugar, including:

- (a) revamped CFS’s Facebook page on Hong Kong’s Action on Salt and Sugars Reduction ([www.facebook.com/HongKongsActiononSaltandSugarsReduction/](http://www.facebook.com/HongKongsActiononSaltandSugarsReduction/)) by incorporating youthful, light and trendy elements to enhance its attractiveness as a platform for information on less salt and sugar and related activities;
- (b) organised a salt and sugar reduction cooking competition and a low-salt

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<sup>5</sup> Drinks, food products with soups and pop-up dishes are excluded.

and low-sugar slogan writing cum poster design competition for primary and secondary school students, with a view to raising their awareness of healthy diets with less salt and sugar and nutrition labels;

- (c) organised a competition which was open to the public in respect of the label designs of the “Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products;
- (d) launched the “Funding Scheme for Promoting the Culture of Low-Salt-Low-Sugar Diets in the Community” in 2017, under which each District Council was allocated \$250,000 for subsidising activities to be organised by district/local groups to disseminate the healthy message of reducing dietary intake of salt and sugar. Each district is rolling out their activities;
- (e) invited chefs to demonstrate how to prepare delicious dishes with less salt and sugar at the Food Expo 2017 in collaboration with the Hong Kong Trade Development Council; and
- (f) co-produced a 13-episode radio programme entitled “Food Court” with Radio Television Hong Kong to publicise the importance of a less-salt-and-sugar and balanced diet in a light-hearted and funny drama setting. The programme is being broadcast every Friday from 6 October to 29 December this year.

### **Promotion of healthy diet**

14. Unhealthy eating habits, including excessive consumption of food that is high in sugar, sodium or fat content, are a burden to health, may cause overweight or obesity, increase the risk of developing non-communicable diseases like hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. The Government’s efforts do not stop at those work on reducing the salt and sugar intake of Hong Kong people. DH and CFS have also been actively promoting healthy dietary habits through collaboration with the food trade, schools and other stakeholders. For example, CFS launched the “Reduce Salt, Sugar, Oil. We Do!” programme in

2014 calling for food premises which are the Food Safety Charter signatories to follow the CFS' advice on reducing salt and sugar in preparing food.

15. DH has all along been adopting a life-course and setting-based approach to encourage and facilitate people of all ages to adopt healthy diet at home, schools, workplaces and in the community. Specific measures include:

- (a) DH promotes, protects and supports breastfeeding. The Family Health Service and Student Health Service of DH provides comprehensive health promotion and disease prevention services to cater for the health needs of young children and students at different growth stages, they promote healthy eating through leaflets, on-line health education information, individual guidance by healthcare personnel etc.. Parents are assisted in choosing the appropriate food for encouraged not to provide sugar-added drinks and snacks to their infants, young and pre-school children; DH also advocates an adequate amount of physical activity by children, and cultivates a healthy diet and lifestyle in children to prevent childhood obesity;
- (b) an EatSmart@school.hk Campaign with emphasis on the promotion of healthy eating was launched in primary schools in the 2006/07 school year. Under the campaign, primary schools developed policies and implemented measures on healthy diets through home-school co-operation, with a view to effectively implementing the nutritional requirements laid down by DH in supplying lunches and snacks. This serves to ensure that school children are nurtured in a “nutrition friendly” environment;
- (c) DH launched the StartSmart@school.hk Campaign in 2012 to promote healthy eating and physical activity among preschoolers at kindergartens and child care centres with a view to preventing childhood obesity;
- (d) launched the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign in 2008 to encourage and assist restaurants to provide dishes with more fruit and vegetables and less oil, salt and sugar; launched a free EatSmart

Restaurant mobile application in 2015 to facilitate the public to locate the EatSmart Restaurants;

- (e) the workplace is an ideal setting for developing a healthy lifestyle. DH launched the Health@work.hk Pilot Project in 2010 and the Second Phase of the Health@work.hk Project in 2012 respectively. In August last year, DH launched the Joyful@Healthy Workplace Programme in collaboration with the Occupational Safety and Health Council. The programme facilitates employers and employees to create a healthy and joyful working environment together through a series of activities. It focuses on three main areas, namely healthy eating, physical activity and mental well-being; and
- (f) at the community level, DH launched the “I’m So Smart” Community Health Promotion Programme in 2012 to mobilise community partners to promote healthy eating and physical activity in the community.

## **Way Forward**

16. “Starting from an early age”, “enhancing transparency of information” and “strengthening publicity and education” are merely the first step for the work of the Government and CRSS.

17. The Government and CRSS have been discussing with the trade on product reformulation to reduce salt and sugar in food. Such work involves complicated factors including modification of formulation, production technologies, consumers’ receptiveness, market demand and business considerations. This is a longer-term goal of CRSS which will take more time to achieve concrete results. The Government and CRSS will continue to strive for the goal.

18. The Government and CRSS will continue to make reference to the recommendations of the WHO, as well as the relevant measures and experience relating to reduction of salt and sugar in food in other places, and give full and



thorough consideration to the local situation, in reviewing and enhancing the effectiveness of the existing measures, and introducing new initiatives. The Government will also continue to work with various stakeholders to actively promote healthy dietary habit.

### **Advice Sought**

19. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Food and Health Bureau**

**Centre for Food Safety, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department**

**Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health**

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