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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 12 March 2019

Administration's efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the Administration's efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food, and summarizes major views and concerns of members of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on the subject.

Background

2. According to information provided by the Administration in November 2017, dietary salt (sodium) and sugar intake is closely related to health. Excessive salt intake will increase the risk of hypertension, fatal stroke and coronary heart disease; while sugar intake is a determinant of body weight and dental caries.

World Health Organisation's recommendations on salt and sugar reduction

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 one level teaspoon of salt).¹ WHO also recommends that free sugar² should make up less than 10% of total

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

² 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.

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 a person having a 2000-Kcal diet.

Administration's efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food

Establishment of the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food ("CRSS")

4. According to the Administration, it attaches much importance to the reduction of salt and sugar intake of Hong Kong people. In March 2015, CRSS was set up to make recommendations to the Secretary for Food and Health ("SFH") on the formulation of policy directions, strategies and work plans for reducing 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.

Promoting a low-salt-low-sugar dietary culture and healthy diet

5. Considering Hong Kong's actual circumstances, 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 before tackling the relatively 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 various stakeholders to 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". For this purpose, specific measures and initiatives are implemented by the Department of Health ("DH") and the Centre for Food Safety ("CFS"), through collaboration with the food trade, schools and other stakeholders.

Members' concerns

6. Members' major views and concerns over the Administration's work in reducing salt and sugar in food are summarized below.

The work of CRSS

7. Expressing doubt on whether CRSS had achieved any concrete results since its establishment in March 2015, some members queried the need to continue to engage CRSS in making recommendations to SFH on the formulation of policy directions and work plans for reducing the intake of salt and sugar by the public. These members took the view that the work tasked upon CRSS could be undertaken by the Food and Health Bureau ("FHB"), DH and/or CFS. Some other members, however, expressed support for the initiatives introduced by the Administration and CRSS. There were suggestions that food premises and restaurants should be encouraged to include in their menus more "low-salt-and-sugar" dishes, and measures for reducing fat and saturated fat in food facilitating the public to make healthier choices should also be introduced.

8. The Administration advised that it was necessary to set up and to continue to count on CRSS to map out an effective strategy for reduction of salt and sugar in food, as excessive intake of salt and sugar had harmful effect on health and local research studies had showed that the dietary intake of salt and sugar among the general public had exceeded the levels recommended by WHO. As the initial step of work, CRSS had advised the Administration to work with stakeholders to promote in the community a healthy diet culture, by developing a low-salt-and-sugar dietary habit from young age, enhancing the transparency of information to help consumers make a healthy choice, and improving publicity and education efforts to increase public awareness of salt and sugar reduction. The Administration and CRSS had been discussing with the trade product reformulation to reduce salt and sugar in food, which was a longer-term goal of CRSS. Such work would take time to achieve concrete results. CRSS would conduct opinion surveys in due course to assess the effectiveness of its initiatives in reducing salt and sugar in food.

"Salt/Sugar" Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products

9. Some members noted that under the voluntary "Salt/Sugar" Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products ("the Scheme") jointly launched by FHB, CFS and CRSS in October 2017, the trade could display labels on all prepackaged food products that were 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 Regulations"). A query was raised as to whether the Administration would consider drawing reference to and adopting in Hong Kong the "traffic-light" food labelling system

implemented by the Government of the United Kingdom³, which, in some members' view, was easy to understand and had proven to be useful in helping consumers identify healthier products.

10. The Administration advised that in designing the Scheme, the Administration and CRSS had drawn reference from the experience and similar schemes in overseas countries, including the "traffic light" labelling scheme of the United Kingdom. The Administration was of the view that the acceptance of trade operators and their active participation were important initial steps in the implementation of a voluntary labelling scheme in Hong Kong. Having taken into account all relevant factors, the Administration decided to adopt simple and clear labels highlighting "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" in prepackaged food products and launched the Scheme in October 2017. The Administration estimated that there were more than 200 prepackaged food products and drinks available in the market which complied with the definitions of "low sodium", "no sodium", "low sugar" or "no sugar" under the Regulations. After the Scheme had been in operation for some time, the Administration would review its implementation as well as the response of consumers and the trade to see whether there was a need to enhance the Scheme for better results.

Other measures to reduce salt and sugar

11. There were suggestions that consideration should be given to (a) enacting legislation to regulate the salt and sugar contents in food in order to better safeguard public health; and (b) imposing a "sugar tax" on food manufacturers/importers according to the volume of the sugar-sweetened food/drinks they produced or imported.

12. Some other members held the view that the Administration should continue to cultivate in Hong Kong a healthy dietary culture through promotion and publicity, instead of resorting to legislative means. In these members' view, the Administration should conduct studies to collect updated information on the intake of salt and sugar by the local population and the impact of those levels on public health to facilitate the formulation of effective strategies for reducing salt and sugar in food.

³ According to information provided by the Administration in December 2017, the "traffic light" front-of-pack labelling scheme is implemented in the United Kingdom on a voluntary basis, in which the green, amber and red colour coding is used to show the content of four nutrients (i.e. fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt) per 100 g/ml of the food/drink (green means low, amber means medium, and red means high).

13. According to the Administration, the first and foremost task ahead was to strengthen publicity and education work to promote less consumption of food that was high in salt and sugar contents. The Administration would continue to make reference to relevant measures and experience relating to reduction of salt and sugar in food in other places, including the implementation of "sugar tax", and would give full and thorough consideration to the local situation in mapping out concrete measures suitable for Hong Kong. If healthy eating habits had been built up among local people, it might not be necessary to regulate salt and sugar contents in food by legislative means.

Latest development

14. The Administration will update members on CRSS' and the Government's latest efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food at the meeting on 12 March 2019.

Relevant papers

15. A list of the relevant papers on the website of the Legislative Council is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
5 March 2019

**Relevant papers on
Administration's efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	14 April 2015 (Item VI)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
	14 November 2017 (Item V)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> Administration's follow-up paper on the initiatives on the reduction of salt and sugar in food (LC Paper No. <u>CB(2)536/17-18(01)</u>)

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