

**For discussion
on 12 May 2020**

**Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene
Implementation of measures to reduce salt and sugar in food**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the progress in the Government's implementation of measures to reduce salt and sugar in food and the key areas of work in the coming year.

Background

2. The Government all along attaches great importance to the work on reducing salt and sugar intake of Hong Kong people, and is committed to minimising the burden of non-communicable diseases to the society through such work. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that adults consume less than 5g of salt daily, and adults' and children's intake of free sugar should make up less than 10% of the total energy intake per day¹, so as to avoid varying degrees of its adverse effect on human health.

3. Excessive intake of salt can increase the risk of hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, stroke, coronary heart disease etc. According to the findings of the Population Health Survey 2014/15 of the Department of Health (DH), Hong Kong people aged 15 to 84 had an average daily salt intake of 8.8g, which is higher than the level recommended by the WHO. The survey also revealed that near 28% of the Hong Kong people had hypertension. If their blood pressure remains persistently high, it may lead to serious health problems and even premature death. Based on the data collected from the dietary studies conducted by the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, it is estimated that the mean intake of total sugar among local adults is 53g per day, which is slightly higher than the guideline of the WHO. Excessive intake of sugar may increase the risk of obesity, heart diseases and diabetes. The 2014/15

¹ For an adult having a 2000-Kcal diet per day, the daily free sugar intake should be less than 50g.

Survey showed that 50% of Hong Kong people aged 15 to 84 were overweight or obese² (i.e. body mass index (BMI) is equal to or greater than 23 kg/m²), and more than 8% had diabetes³.

Initiatives to promote territory-wide salt and sugar reduction

4. The Food and Health Bureau (FHB), CFS, DH and the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (CRSS) have been promoting salt and sugar reduction through five directions over the past years, including starting from an early age, enhancing transparency of information, encouraging restaurants to reduce salt and sugar, reformulation of prepackaged food products, and strengthening publicity and education. Details of various activities/measures implemented along these five directions are as follows:

“Starting from an early age”

5. DH has been actively taking forward health education on salt and sugar reduction at schools. Starting from 2018/19 school year, DH has launched the Healthy Drinks at School Charter at kindergartens and child care centres. As at to-date, more than 430 kindergartens and child care centres, representing about 40% of all kindergartens and child care centres in Hong Kong, have joined the Charter. The participating schools pledge to provide children with water and healthy drinks, not to provide drinks with added sugar or a relatively high sugar content, and not to use food as a reward.

6. In addition, DH has launched the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches since 2017/18 school year. So far, 13 school lunch suppliers joined the Scheme and provided sodium-reduced lunch options to around 520 primary schools in Hong Kong (i.e. around 90% of all primary schools). DH’s target is to reduce the average sodium level of primary school lunches by 5% to 10% per year, with a view to cutting the average sodium level of primary school lunches down to not more than 500mg in ten years. In 2017/18 school year, the average sodium content of primary school lunch decreased by 14%, which already met the Scheme’s sodium reduction target for 2018.

² Obesity may increase the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancers.

³ Diabetes may increase the risk of cerebrovascular disease, heart diseases, foot gangrene, retinopathy, nephropathy and neuropathy.

7. In mid-2019, FHB distributed a Salt and Sugar Reduction Teaching Kit to kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, with a view to encouraging teachers to raise students' awareness of the importance of a less-salt-and-sugar diet using visual tools and in a real-life context. FHB, in conjunction with the Education Bureau, CFS and DH has organised four briefing sessions to provide teachers with information on health, and to support them to make the best use of the Salt and Sugar Reduction Teaching Kit. Teachers who have attended the briefings commented that the briefings deepened their understanding of the topics and gave them insights on strategies that could be deployed to teach students about healthy eating.

Enhancing transparency of information

8. We launched in October 2017 the "Salt/Sugar" Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products to help the public to easily identify prepackaged food products which could meet the legal definition of "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" by label display. At present, more than 210 prepackaged food products have participated in the Scheme. To enhance the public's and the trade's awareness of the Scheme, we launched an Announcement of Public Interest (API) on TV stations in August 2019, and published information on the Scheme in regular publications of major chambers of commerce or associations to encourage more trade members to participate. We also actively approached manufacturers and importers to promote the Scheme and enlist their support.

Encouraging restaurants to reduce salt and sugar

9. Since we launched the Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurants Scheme in early 2019, close to 950 restaurants have participated and provided customers with either options of reduced salt and/or sugar or tailor-made less-salt-and-sugar dishes (tailor-made dishes), so that the public can have more healthy choices when eating out. We have also promoted the Scheme to the public through an online restaurant search platform, in order to encourage more restaurants to join. From February 2019 till now, the total number of searches for less-salt-and-sugar restaurants through the platform has exceeded 170 million. According to a telephone survey conducted by FHB on restaurants providing tailor-made dishes from December 2019 to January 2020, 94% of the respondents said that their customers were satisfied with or welcomed these dishes.

Reformulation of prepackaged food products

10. Reformulation of food products requires techniques, cooperation, research and continuous testing and improvements. According to information provided by CFS, white bread (with an average daily consumption of about 15g per person) and wholemeal bread (with an average daily consumption of 4g per person) are the first and second most popular types of bread consumed by Hong Kong people. Moreover, bread is the fourth major food categories of sodium intake by adults in Hong Kong. In a survey jointly conducted by CFS and the Consumer Council in 2018, it was revealed that the sodium content of bread of the same type could vary considerably, indicating that there was room for the trade to reduce the sodium content. In view of this, CFS conducted rounds of discussion with the trade to agree on voluntary sodium reduction targets for prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread in late September 2019. Seven chained bakery shops and manufacturers agreed to participate in the Salt Reduction Scheme, striving to reduce the sodium content in their bread through product reformulation in order to meet the voluntary targets while not compromising the texture and the taste of bread. Our next step is to extend the Scheme to non-prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread, and invite more bread manufacturers to join the Scheme. We will also provide technical support to participants to improve their product formulae. We plan to implement the Salt Reduction Scheme for non-prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread within this year.

Strengthening publicity and education

11. The Government and the CRSS have been promoting territory-wide salt and sugar reduction through a wide range of public education and publicity activities. Taking the year of 2019 as an example, we have organised various activities including a large-scale publicity event at Tai Kwun in February, a media tea reception in May with seven celebrity chefs conducting cooking demonstrations, and staging, for the third time, cooking demonstrations by four “star chefs” at Food Expo in August on a day designated as the Less-salt-and-sugar Day, during which less-salt-and-sugar information was disseminated to hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Food Expo.

12. Besides, we have been disseminating messages to the public via the Facebook and Instagram pages on “Hong Kong’s Action on Salt & Sugar Reduction”. Since its launch in January 2015, the Facebook page has

attracted over 12 700 followers with an organic reach⁴ of over 1 600 000, whereas the Instagram page has over 4 100 followers within a year or so since its launch in July 2018 with an organic reach of over 410 000.

13. We have also produced radio programmes, music videos and API on television, and engaged key opinion leaders to help promote less-salt-and-sugar diet and perform online cooking demonstration so as to lead the dining trend. Hundreds of thousands of views were recorded for publicity and educational efforts made on social media platforms.

Key Areas of Work in the Coming Year

14. With the efforts of the Government and the CRSS in pursuing the relevant measures over the years, we notice that public awareness of less-salt-and-sugar diet has been increasing. For example, there is a growing number of reduced salt, reduced sugar or even no salt, no sugar dishes and food available in the market; more people would choose reduced sugar, low sugar or even no sugar options when purchasing beverages; 94% of the restaurants that participate in the Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurants Scheme indicate that diners are satisfied with or welcome the tailor-made dishes they provide. In the coming year, we will keep up our efforts to further reduce local population's daily intake of salt and sugar through tri-partite collaboration between the Government, the food trade and the consumers.

15. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, we have adjusted the publicity and promotional plan for this year. Publicity channels have so far been confined to the mass media and online media platforms, with a focus on encouraging members of the public to minimise eating out and follow a less-salt-and-sugar diet at home. After the COVID-19 subsides, we will step up the launch of various kinds of less-salt-and-sugar publicity and educational work to put across the message to different stakeholders.

16. With regard to the promotion to food trade, we plan to:

- (i) recruit more restaurants to participate in the Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurants Scheme, and encourage those that are already in the Scheme to provide customers with a greater variety of less-salt-and-sugar dishes, as well as to promote such restaurants to the public

⁴ Organic reach means the total number of people reached by a single post at a dedicated page of Facebook, without any boost by paid advertisement.

through different means (such as promoting the restaurants and the dishes they offered on online gourmet platforms, organising restaurants to offer discounts on reduced-sugar or low sugary drinks on a selected day every week, arranging food magazines/online gourmet platforms to interview less-salt-and-sugar restaurants, organising food-tasting activities etc.) so as to entice the public into opting for less-salt-and-sugar choices when eating out.

- (ii) identify prepackaged food products that meet the legal definitions of “low salt”, “low sugar”, “no salt” and “no sugar”, proactively approach the concerned manufacturers and importers, including online shopping platforms, and incentivise the manufacturers and importers to display the relevant labels on their products. The incentives include publicising all labelled products on the CFS website and showing the labels against the relevant products on the Consumer Council's Online Price Watch website so that consumers may easily search for them.
- (iii) continue our discussion with different local manufacturers on reformulation of various food products in a bid to reduce the salt and sugar level in food and provide manufacturers with consultant's advice on product reformulation as and when required.

17. For members of the public, we shall carry out general promotion and public education on the one hand, and design activities/messages that target different groups of stakeholders (such as children, parents, domestic helpers, office workers etc.) on the other hand, in order to enhance the effectiveness of promotion. We shall also recommend some small and practical goals for the public (such as taking a less-salt-and-sugar meal every week and inviting friends to join in, having sauces served separately to avoid over-consumption of salt etc.), with a view to changing their dietary habit incrementally.

18. We have just mounted publicity along the mass transit railway network, and collaborated with a TV station to include less-salt-and-sugar dishes in a cookery programme broadcast at night time. Our aim is to instil into more families the concept that dishes with less salt and sugar could be delicious. Specific publicity strategies for each group include:

- (i) children: we shall adopt a relaxing and upbeat approach to encourage children to take the initiative to observe less-salt-and-sugar healthy diets through games and fun-filled animations or cartoon videos.

- (ii) young people: we shall promote a simple and refreshing dining trend among young people through on-campus publicity, informative medium such as documentary etc. The purpose is to impress upon them that it is easier to follow a less-salt-and-sugar diet than they imagine.
- (iii) office workers: we shall provide special support for busy office workers by offering healthy eating choices via social media, suggesting refreshing alternatives via less-salt-and-sugar food map, and making available expert advice and information on the media. We seek to promote the trend of healthy eating as part of the lifestyle of office workers, and an attitude of leading a busy yet healthy life.
- (iv) parents and domestic helpers: less-salt-and-sugar dietary habit should start from an early age, so parents and domestic helpers have an especially important role to play. We shall enlist parents and domestic helpers to bring home the messages of less-salt-and-sugar diets through cooking demonstrations by key opinion leaders of social media, cooking contests for domestic helpers, media coverage, highlights of documentaries etc.
- (v) chefs: we plan to enlist the support of passionate and influential chefs to promote less-salt-and-sugar culinary culture, so as to mobilise other chefs to follow suit.

19. We will continue to adopt the above-mentioned strategies in our promotional efforts to encourage more people to follow the less-salt-and-sugar dietary culture.

Advice sought

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

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