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Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 12 May 2020**

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 ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

2. According to information provided by the Administration in March 2019, excessive salt (sodium) intake may cause hypertension, fatal stroke and coronary heart disease, while excessive sugar intake may lead to obesity¹ and dental caries.

World Health Organization's recommendations on salt and sugar reduction

3. The World Health Organization ("WHO") recommends that adults consume less than 5 g of salt daily (i.e. slightly less than one level teaspoon of salt).² WHO also recommends that free sugar³ should make up less than 10%

¹ Obesity is a risk factor for hypertension, heart disease and diabetes.

² 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.

³ 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.

of the total energy intake per day for both adults and children.⁴

Administration's efforts in reducing salt and sugar in food

Establishment of the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food

4. According to the Administration, it attaches much importance to the reduction of salt and sugar intake of Hong Kong people. In March 2015, the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food ("CRSS") was set up to make recommendations to the Secretary for Food and Health 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 various 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

5. In May 2018, the Food and Health Bureau ("FHB") and the Department of Health ("DH") announced "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong" ("Action Plan"). The targets include achieving a 30% relative reduction in the mean population daily intake of sodium, halting the rise in diabetes and obesity, and containing the prevalence of raised blood pressure by 2025.

6. To promote territory-wide salt and sugar reduction, FHB, the Centre for Food Safety ("CFS") of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and CRSS have introduced measures through five directions which include "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".

Members' concerns

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

Promotion of less salt and sugar in food

8. While some members expressed a view that the publicity programmes

⁴ For an adult having a 2 000-Kcal diet per day, the daily free sugar intake should be less than 50 g (i.e. about 10 sugar cubes).

conducted by the Administration and CRSS in recent years had gradually enhanced public awareness of the merits of reducing dietary intake of salt and sugar, some other members criticized that the Administration and CRSS had achieved little progress in implementing concrete measures on the same front. A query was raised as to whether the continued implementation of existing measures to promote a low-salt-low-sugar dietary culture could help achieve the targets set under the Action Plan.

9. According to the Administration, the first and foremost task was to promote a low-salt-low-sugar dietary culture, which would see the public gradually change from a high-salt-high-sugar diet to a relatively healthier one. Such a change would generate the demand for low-salt and low-sugar food and stimulate proactive response from the food trade. Over the years, DH had been promoting healthy eating, including less-salt-and-sugar diets, at kindergartens and child care centres through the "StartSmart@school.hk" Campaign. Since the 2017-2018 school year, DH had launched the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches, with a view to gradually reducing the sodium level of school lunches for primary students. FHB and CFS had also been actively promoting healthy dietary habits through collaboration with the food trade and the promotional efforts were starting to bear fruits. For instance, since January 2019, more than 500 restaurants involving over 100 brand names had supported the salt and sugar reduction scheme and provided customers with options of reduced salt and/or sugar or tailor-made less-salt-and-sugar dishes. Several large-scale food manufacturers had also reformulated, or undertaken to reformulate, their prepackaged food products, covering various types of drinks, instant noodles and soups. All these indicated that healthy eating habits were being built up among local people.

10. There was a suggestion that the Administration should strengthen its collaboration with the food trade to provide the public with healthier food choices. Consideration could be given to providing advice to restaurants on low-salt and low-sugar cooking methods and the amount of salt and sugar to be used for preparation of common dishes. An enquiry was raised as to whether a logo would be designed for issue to and display on food premises which provided low-salt-low-sugar dishes for the public's easy reference.

11. The Administration advised that there were logos for restaurants which provided low-salt-low-sugar dishes to display on their premises and menus. On 23 February 2019, FHB, CFS and CRSS jointly held a promotional event "Salt & Sugar Reduction Day". Representatives from some of the aforementioned 500-plus food premises supporting the salt and sugar reduction scheme had participated in the promotional event.

12. Some members were of the view that most of the drinks supplied in primary and secondary schools had a sugar content exceeding the children's daily free sugar intake limit recommended by WHO. These members suggested that in carrying out publicity programmes on reduction of salt and sugar, focus should be placed on educating the public on the definitions of "low salt" and "low sugar" and how to apply the concepts in practice to select food products with low content of salt and sugar.

13. According to the Administration, FHB and CRSS had been carrying out a wide range of publicity and educational efforts through various channels, including television, social media, the Facebook and Instagram pages on "Hong Kong's Action on Salt & Sugar Reduction", promotional activities and competitions. Educational kits were also developed for primary and secondary schools to facilitate easy understanding of the salt and sugar contents in daily food products. The Administration would consider how to deliver the concepts of "low salt" and "low sugar" in more vivid ways.

Enhancing transparency of prepackaged food products

14. Some members took the view that it should be made a mandatory requirement for food manufacturers to indicate on the food labels for prepackaged food products the sodium and sugar levels in the product by colour coding to help consumers choose healthier products easily at a glance. Local restaurants should also be encouraged to show on their menus the sodium and sugar levels in the dishes by colour coding. 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 Kingdom, under which the green, amber and red colour coding⁵ was used to show the content of four nutrients (i.e. fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt) of the food/drink concerned.

15. The Administration advised that the voluntary "Salt/Sugar" Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products ("the Label Scheme") jointly launched by FHB, CFS and CRSS in October 2017 had enabled the trade to 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"). The Administration noted that a local university and an Australian institute had jointly launched a mobile application ("mobile app") to show how healthy or

⁵ According to information provided by the Administration, 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.

otherwise a food product was by highlighting the fat, salt, sugar and energy contents through a colour-coded and star-rated system. The Administration would keep in view the effectiveness and popularity of the use of the mobile app in helping consumers make healthier food choices.

16. There was a suggestion that to facilitate consumers to make wiser choices, a list of prepackaged food products that were in compliance with the definitions of "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" under the Regulations be posted onto the relevant government websites and included in the relevant publicity materials. The Administration responded that CFS had set up a dedicated webpage on the Label Scheme. More than 230 food products had displayed the relevant labels and CFS had uploaded information on those products onto the dedicated webpage. Moreover, FHB and CFS were encouraging those prepackaged food products that were found in compliance with the definitions of "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" under the Regulations but had not yet participated in the Label Scheme to join it.

17. In response to an enquiry about enforcement actions taken over the past few years against false claims of "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" on the packaging labels (including nutrition labels or the specific display labels used under the Label Scheme) of prepackaged food products, the Administration advised that the terms "low salt", "no salt", "low sugar" and "no sugar" were clearly defined under the Regulations. CFS adopted a risk-based approach in checking the nutrition labels of prepackaged food products. Enforcement actions would be taken against cases involving false claims of labels.

Latest development

18. The Administration will report to the Panel on the progress of implementing various initiatives for reducing salt and sugar in food at the meeting on 12 May 2020.

Relevant papers

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

**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>)
	12 March 2019 (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)1789/18-19(01)</u>)