

For Information

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 work in the coming year.

Background

2. Excessive sodium intake may cause hypertension, fatal stroke and coronary heart disease. Excessive sugar intake may lead to obesity and dental caries, and increase the risk of developing hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that the daily sodium intake for an adult should be less than 2 000mg (i.e. 5g of salt or slightly less than one level teaspoon of salt), and adults' and children's intake of free sugar should make up less than 10% of the total energy intake per day¹. According to the findings of the Population Health Survey (PHS) 2014/15 of the Department of Health (DH), Hong Kong people aged 15 to 84 had an average daily sodium intake of 3.5g (i.e. 8.8g of salt), which exceeds the standard of the WHO. DH is conducting the PHS 2020 and the findings will provide the updated figures of the average daily sodium intake of Hong Kong people.

3. In addition, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and DH announced "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong" in May 2018. Nine local targets were set, including 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 or before.

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

Initiatives to promote territory-wide salt and sugar reduction

4. FHB, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, DH and the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food (CRSS) have been promoting salt and sugar reduction through five directions since 2015, 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.

“Starting from an early age”

5. DH has launched the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches since 2017/18 school year, which targets at reducing the average sodium level of primary school lunches by 5% to 10% per year, with a view to cutting the average sodium level of lunches down to not more than 500mg in ten years. At present, a total of 12 school lunch suppliers have joined the Scheme and designed more than 3 000 sodium-reduced lunch options for schools. DH has also implemented a three-year Healthy Drinks at School Charter at kindergartens and child care centres starting from the 2018/19 school year, with near 480 kindergartens and child care centres participating (i.e. about 45% of all kindergartens and child care centres in Hong Kong), which pledge to provide children with water and healthy drinks, and not to use food as a reward. DH conducted a survey earlier on regarding the implementation of this Charter among participating kindergartens and child care centres. The results showed that the Charter had a positive impact on kindergartens and child care centres. As such, DH decided to continue with the Charter for another three years.

6. Moreover, a cartoon animation rhyme for young children was produced in the 2020/21 school year. Teachers of kindergartens and child care centres are encouraged to download the rhyme, so that young children can learn through songs at an early age to avoid food which is high in sugar and salt. In addition, an electronic game on less-salt-and-sugar diet is developed for free download, so that children can learn to choose healthy food through the game. In recent public education activities, we also set up the electronic game on less-salt-and-sugar diet with motion sensors for public participation, which received an overwhelming response.

7. FHB, in conjunction with the Education Bureau, CFS and DH, has organised briefing sessions to provide teachers with information on health, to introduce the latest teaching aids and information on salt and sugar reduction, and to support them to make the best use of the Salt and Sugar Reduction Teaching Kit.

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. Over the past year (i.e. in 2020-21), we actively promoted the Scheme to manufacturers/importers, advertised the Scheme at MTR and distributed free magnet stickers with the “Salt/Sugar” label to the public at an MTR station. The public can scan the QR code on the magnetic sticker to learn more about the Scheme. Besides, we promoted the Scheme through advertorials and articles on social media and newspapers, and uploading posts on the Facebook page of Hong Kong’s Action on Salt and Sugar Reduction from time to time.

Encouraging restaurants to reduce salt and sugar

9. The CRSS launched the Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurants Scheme in 2019. At present, a total of over 1 100 restaurants have participated, representing a net increase of about 16% compared to that of last year. Participating restaurants include Chinese, Western, vegetarian and social enterprise restaurants etc. Among them, about 380 provide customers with tailor-made less-salt-and-sugar dishes. The public can have more healthy choices when eating out.

10. To strengthen the publicity of the Scheme, we have partnered with a popular online restaurant search platform since early 2019 and introduced a Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurant icon to facilitate search of relevant restaurants. In the past six months, the average monthly searches for less-salt-and-sugar restaurants through the platform reached 26.37 million, representing an increase of 60% compared to the average monthly figure last year.

11. We also launched the Less Sugar Friday Campaign from August 2020 to June 2021 to encourage the public to gradually develop a less-sugar

dietary habit by choosing sugar-reduced beverages. A total of 145 tea houses joined the Campaign. In a customer survey conducted on the Campaign in late 2020, it was revealed that 74% of the respondents would opt for sugar-reduced or sugar-free beverages.

Reformulation of prepackaged food products

12. In 2019, CFS launched the voluntary Sodium Reduction Scheme for prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread, with seven bread manufacturers of chained bakery shops participating. After a year of trial and research, the seven bread manufacturers successfully reduced the sodium content of their prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread. All their products met the voluntary maximum sodium reduction targets², and the overall average sodium content reduced by 3% from September 2019 to December 2020 and further reduced by 3 to 4% from December 2020 to May 2021, representing a cumulative reduction of 6 to 7%. CFS extended the Scheme to non-prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread in 2020, with a total of 16 non-prepackaged bread manufacturers joining. As at present, the sodium content of the bread of all participating non-prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread manufacturers have met the voluntary maximum sodium reduction targets, with the overall average sodium content of white bread and wholemeal bread reduced by 11% and 13% respectively. CFS will continue to provide technical support and tests for participating bread manufacturers.

Strengthening publicity and education

13. We consider that the best way to enhance public’s acceptance of less-salt-and-sugar healthy dietary culture is to work on publicity and education to effect gradual changes. Due to the epidemic, our publicity and education work was mainly carried out via social media in the past year, including performing online less-salt-and-sugar cooking demonstrations; engaging key opinion leaders of social media to help promote information on salt and sugar reduction; promoting low-salt-low-sugar diet through

² The sodium reduction targets for prepackaged and non-prepackaged white bread and wholemeal bread set by CFS and bread manufacturers:

	Voluntary sodium reduction targets (sodium content per 100g of bread)	
	Average	Maximum
White bread	380 mg	490 mg
Wholemeal bread	380 mg	470 mg

posts on social media; producing and broadcasting online publicity videos and short documentaries on salt and sugar reduction; sponsoring TV programmes; producing cartoon animation rhyme; and designing online quizzes etc. In addition, we displayed posters and advertisement boards on mass transport, distributed free promotional magnetic stickers, and organised a media briefing in February 2021 to brief the media the deliverables of the CRSS in the past six years.

14. We will also continue to disseminate the message of salt and sugar reduction 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 15 700 followers with an organic reach³ of over 2 200 000, whereas the Instagram page has over 6 000 followers since its launch in July 2018 with an organic reach of over 2 300 000.

15. With the epidemic situation starting to ease off early this year and public fairs gradually launched, we conducted two publicity activities at the 18th Hong Kong Food Festival in early April and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) Lifestyle ShoppingFest 2021 in late April. Booths were set up for the first time in these two events to introduce to the public the importance of less-salt-and-sugar diet through interesting electronic games, quizzes with prize and food display etc. Moreover, dieticians volunteered to provide free consultation service on healthy diet to the public while talks on nutrition label were organised at the Lifestyle ShoppingFest. We have arranged less-salt-and-sugar cooking demonstrations and again set up a booth at HKTDC Food Expo in August this year to reach more people and share with them dietary information on less salt and sugar.

Key areas of work in the coming year

16. The Government and the CRSS will, on the basis of the above measures, continue to work with the trade and various stakeholders to promote less-salt-and-sugar dietary culture and provide members of the public with more choices of food with less salt and sugar in the coming year. Specifically for the food industry, we will continue to:

- (i) promote the Less-salt-and-sugar Restaurants Scheme

³ 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.

and encourage more restaurants to participate and provide customers with more tailor-made less-salt-and-sugar dishes;

- (ii) promote the “Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products and encourage more food manufacturers, importers and distributors to use the labels to facilitate the identification of prepackaged food products with low salt, no salt, low sugar, or no sugar by members of the public; and
- (iii) encourage and support the food industry to reformulate food products to achieve the target of salt and sugar reduction.

17. On the publicity and education front, we will continue to disseminate messages on less salt and sugar to the public via various channels, such as social media, television and radio, and adopt specific promotional strategies for different target groups including:

- (i) children: we will discuss with schools to organise less-salt-and-sugar cooking classes on a pilot basis and continue to provide secondary and primary schools as well as kindergartens with educational information and electronic teaching aids etc. on salt and sugar reduction;
- (ii) young people: we will step up promotional work at tertiary institutions and recruit tertiary students to become Less-Salt-and-Sugar Food Ambassadors to assist in promotional activities. In addition, we will team up with the Vocational Training Council (VTC) to organise less-salt-and-sugar recipe design and cooking contests for VTC students of nutritional studies, the Chinese Culinary Institute and the International Cuisine Institute.
- (iii) foreign domestic helpers: we will translate information on salt and sugar reduction into Tagalog and Indonesian so that foreign domestic helpers can learn more of the importance of salt and sugar reduction and prepare less-salt-and-sugar meals.

Advice sought

18. 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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