

Seeking sweet spot in cutting sugar intake



Sugar consumption has gone up, putting a dent in the Health Ministry's War on Diabetes. But it is hitting back by proposing four measures to reduce sugar intake. Experts and drink companies weigh in on the matter.

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Felicia Choo

While on the move in his job as a real estate agent, fruit juices and soda drinks became some of Mr Sum Chong Ming's favourite ways to quench his thirst. Even though he had water with him, it just didn't taste the same. "I have a sweet tooth and ice cream and pastries are my biggest weaknesses," says Mr Sum. "I can eat a whole tub of ice cream at one go." But he put the brakes on consuming sugary food and drinks last year, after a health check-up showed he was pre-diabetic.

Mr Sum, 59, now tracks his daily sugar intake with the help of an app from the National University Hospital (NUH), and has cut his intake of sugar and carbohydrates further. The change in his diet has improved his health, with his HbA1c – a measure of average blood sugar level – dropping from 6.9 per cent to 6.3 per cent over the last three months.

He also shed more than 5kg over the last six months.

While Mr Sum has managed to eat less sugar, many here are consuming more sugar than before. Singaporeans' sugar intake increased from 59g a day in 2010 to 60g last year – the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends a maximum of 50g – with pre-packaged sugar-sweetened drinks the largest contributor, based on last year's National Nutrition Survey by the Health Promotion Board (HPB).

Which is why the Ministry of Health (MOH) is targeting such drinks in its latest efforts to bring down sugar consumption as part of its War on Diabetes campaign.

Last month, the MOH proposed four measures: banning the sale of higher-sugar, pre-packaged drinks; imposing a tax on manufacturers and importers of pre-packaged drinks; a mandatory front-of-pack nutrition label on pre-packaged drinks; and placing wider restrictions on banning the advertisements of high-sugar drinks.

The measures, which are not mutually exclusive, have been put up for public consultation that started last month and ends on Friday. Insights look at how Singaporeans' intake of sugar got to be so high, and speaks to experts and industry players about what is being done, and can be done, to reverse the trend.

RIISING SUGAR CONSUMPTION

People everywhere – not just in Singapore – are taking more sugar. But regularly consuming too much for a prolonged period is bad for health.

Excessive sugar consumption is linked to conditions like obesity, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, tooth decay and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, says Dr Lim Si Lin, NUH's chief dietitian.

Sugar provides calories with no added nutrients. There is no harm if you consume too little or no sugar as carbohydrates from wholegrains

can be the main source of energy."

The WHO recommends a daily sugar intake of, ideally, 25g (which is half the maximum recommended amount), but Singaporeans are already taking more than twice that.

With drinks making up more than half of the 60g of sugar that people here take every day, it is no wonder that the MOH has been stepping up its War on Diabetes, a campaign that was launched in 2016 to tackle the disease.

Two years ago, seven major soft drink manufacturers pledged to reduce sugar content in all their drinks here to 12 per cent and below by 2020.

The Diabetes Prevention and Care Taskforce worked with Coca-Cola, F&N Foods, Malaysia Dairy Industries, Nestle, PepsiCo, Pokka, and Yeo Hiap Seng, whose products make up 70 per cent of the total pre-packaged sugar-sweetened beverages market in Singapore.

The eventual goal is to get Singaporeans to cut their sugar intake – based on the 2020, the HPB says – by a quarter by 2020, the HPB says last year.

But that looks like a tall order. High-sugar food and drinks are getting cheaper and becoming more easily available, while portion sizes are getting bigger and people are eating more processed food, experts say.

Professor Rob van Dam, an epidemiologist at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, says: "One reason for the increased portion size of sugary beverages is probably that the incremental cost of producing larger-sized beverages is relatively low, while a larger beverage size gives consumers the feeling they get better value for money."

"This is problematic because people tend to have a 'unit bias' – they tend to think one unit, for example one cup of a beverage, is the normal amount to consume, even though the unit size increases."

Business also comes into play – sugar is easily transportable as high-fructose corn syrup, and highly marketed because foods containing lots of sugar tend to have high profit margins, says Professor Eric Finkelstein, who is with the health services and systems research programme at Duke-NUS Medical School.

Assistant Professor Yusuf Ali, who specialises in metabolic diseases at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, says another major factor could be that Singaporeans are eating out more.

"When dining out, charging for a glass of tap water may compel many to order a sugary drink instead," he adds.

Prof Yusaf also points out that because sugar is found in so many products, it is probably not possible to single out a particular sector for the increase in sugar consumption.

In fact, while Singaporeans get most of their sugar from pre-packaged, sugar-sweetened drinks, overall they are consuming less sugar from front-of-pack labelling, public education on the health benefits of drinks like sauces, confectionery and



Mr Sum Chong Ming started cutting down on sugar after a health check-up showed that he was pre-diabetic. It is all about discipline, he says. ST PHOTO: SABIHA CHAUDHURY

desserts, figures from the National Nutrition Survey show. In 2010, sugar from drinks made up 59 per cent of people's total sugar intake, while sugar from food was 41 per cent.

There has since been a reversal, with sugar from drinks contributing to 65 per cent of people's total sugar intake last year, whereas sugar from food rose to 45 per cent.

Still, beverages remain a major source of sugar for two reasons – they are frequently consumed and can be drunk in large amounts without filling people up, says Prof van Dam.

But a narrow focus on pre-packaged drinks in a bid to reduce sugar intake means people can simply substitute them with other sugary alternatives.

Those who target one food or class of foods like beverages are likely to have a small impact in addressing obesity and diabetes, says Prof Finkelstein.

Indeed, Prof Yusaf notes: "People are free to choose, and choices increase with rising incomes."

"Beyond pre-packaged drinks, you have coffee, milk tea, fresh fruit juice outlets – the ones that add syrup – that all have a part to play in this increase."

"Some of these outlets have been brushed off as fads but they do not seem to go away because they keep reinventing themselves with new concoctions and sweet flavours."

REDUCING THIRST FOR PRE-PACKAGED SUGARY DRINKS

So, with the MOH's focus on pre-packaged drinks for now, can the proposed measures together or individually – a ban, sugar tax, front-of-pack nutrition labelling or advertising restrictions – halt the rise in sugar intake?

These strategies are likely to be more effective if they are designed to complement one another, say experts.

Prof van Dam thinks that the sugar tax should go hand in hand with front-of-pack labelling, public education on the health benefits of drinks like sauces, confectionery and

advertising restrictions. "Research has shown that front-of-pack labels are effective in improving people's food and beverage choices," he says.

"Only a small proportion of the population uses detailed nutrition labels on the back of products – these require substantial time and nutritional knowledge to interpret."

Agreeing, Dr Lim says it is still uncommon for people to read food labels to understand the amount of sugar that a particular food contains.

Then there is the much-debated issue of the sugar tax. Proponents like Prof van Dam say that it can motivate beverage manufacturers to reformulate their drinks to contain less sugar, especially if different levels of tax are used for different concentrations of sugar in beverages.

And it has been shown that taxes on beverages result in a modest decrease in net calorie intake and a bit of weight loss, says Prof Finkelstein.

But the less palatable effect is higher prices for consumers if beverage manufacturers decide to pass that tax on.

"Each measure will have differential effects but the devil is in the details," says Prof Finkelstein.

"Bans on products tend to be more effective than taxes in reducing consumption of the targeted product, which tend to be more effective than labels."

The most effective strategy, he proposes, is to push the scope of the tax and labelling further.

"I would be inclined to promote a strategy that taxes and labels' worst in class' products across all product categories, and not just sugar-sweetened beverages, in terms of added sugars and fats," he says.

Our research shows that a labelled tax strategy such as this will move people away from purchasing these products. It also will encourage suppliers to reformulate in efforts to avoid the tax."

CUSTOMERS GETTING MORE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS

With their profits at stake, beverage companies have been actively

reformulating their drinks to introduce less-sugar options, in line with the growing number of health-conscious consumers.

Consumer products company Malaysia Dairy Industries says that all of its beverages under the well-known Marigold and Vitagen brands have achieved the HPB's 12 per cent sugar (12g per 100ml) target for the industry, with a few, small-volume drinks containing more than 14g of sugar per 100ml.

"There is a continuous shift in consumers' palate for sweetness, and products with less sugar or no sugar added have been experiencing a steady increase year on year," says the company's general manager, Mr Leong Yin Hoe.

Coca-Cola Singapore says that since making the pledge to reduce sugar content in its drinks, it has launched several new lower- and no-sugar drinks and has also rethought several of its recipes in Singapore to reduce sugar.

Such drinks are proving popular here, with sales of two popular no-sugar drinks – Coca-Cola No Sugar and Authentic Tea House Ayataka Green Tea – seeing double-digit growth last year, while the non-alcoholic ready-to-drink sector as a whole contracted over the same period, the company says.

"We will also continue to make smaller packages available so that managing sugar is easier, give people the information they need to make informed choices, and diligently follow our longstanding policy not to target advertising at children under age 12 anywhere in the world, including in Singapore," Coca-Cola Singapore adds.

It previously announced an additional commitment to reduce the sugar content in its sugar-sweetened beverages by 10 per cent next year.

The general manager of food and beverage company F&N Foods, Ms Jennifer See, says it has reduced its sugar footprint by 40 per cent over the last 14 years, and 80 per cent of its beverage sales is made up of Healthier Choice Syrup drinks.

However, on the MOH's pro-

posed measures, Malaysia Dairy Industries' Mr Leong raised concerns about how to ensure a level playing field for home-grown and non-local market players, which he says is critical for the sustainability of local companies.

"Will there be similar control of imported products? What about non-packaged beverages and freshly prepared or made-to-order beverages?" he asks.

"A holistic approach should be taken to deal with the matter and (the) overall objective of lowering Singaporeans' sugar intake to combat diabetes."

Prof van Dam notes that if manufacturers are successful in producing lower-sugar beverages, that may open new business opportunities in Singapore and abroad.

Some bubble tea brands also say that more customers are showing preference for less sugary options.

Nearly 80 per cent of customers at the popular Gong Cha chain of outlets opt for a white level of 50 per cent and below, while home-grown brand Lihos says more customers have been asking for lower-sugar levels and sugar substitutes like plant extract stevia since the War on Diabetes kicked off.

Another chain, Koi – popular for its Taiwanese bubble tea – has 15 Healthier Choice drinks endorsed by the HPB, but its drinks also have 120 per cent sugar levels options.

"The 120 per cent sugar (option) was introduced as we understand Singapore holds a stronger palate and there is demand," says its spokesman.

At the end of the day, it is a matter of choice by the consumer.

Take Mr Sum. He says that cutting out more sugar was not so difficult after all. "It boils down to individual discipline," he says.

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