

# Three experts' views on four proposals

Singaporeans take an average of 60g of sugar a day, which is higher than advisable.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) says 50g of sugar is the maximum people should take a day. Ideally, it says, consumption should be no more than 25g a day.

The WHO guideline does not refer to the sugars in fresh fruit and vegetables, and sugars naturally present in milk, because there is no reported evidence of adverse effects of consuming these.

The Ministry of Health has proposed four measures to try to reduce the consumption of pre-packaged sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) here.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health; Dr Jeremy Lim, consultant at global consulting firm Oliver Wyman; and Straits Times senior health correspondent Salma Khalik give their views on the proposals.

## **BAN HIGH-SUGAR DRINKS:**

**Teo Yik Ying:** Infringes on personal liberty and freedom of choice.

**Jeremy Lim:** Not in favour.

**Salma Khalik:** There are too many extremely high-sugar drinks that are not pre-packaged, and so do not fall under this proposal. It is thus of limited use. Having said that, SSBs are cheaper and more easy to obtain, so getting them off the shelves might be helpful.

But the final decision hinges on what is considered really high sugar content. It is fine to have a ban if only a small number of drinks are involved, but not if it means clearing the shelves of a number of favourites.

## **IMPOSE A TAX ON HIGH-SUGAR DRINKS**

**TY:** Provides a strong incentive for industry to reformulate and innovate. Clear signal to the public on the downside of consuming beverages high in sugar. Also generates revenue that can be channelled towards bringing down costs of healthy products.

But unless the tax is applied across a wide array of sugar-laden products, singling out only SSBs may lead to substitution effects where consumers obtain their sugar fix from other food products.

**JL:** Graded taxes based on sugar content make more sense, much like progressive income tax models.

Substitution is very real, and taxation only on processed drinks, while ignoring the freshly prepared drinks in coffee shops, cafes and so on would just produce an unfair commercial playing field.

The bigger benefit of taxation might be signalling societal disapproval and nudging manufacturer reformulation, much like what has happened in the United Kingdom.

**SK:** Totally in favour. It is likely to get manufacturers to reduce the sugar content to avoid paying the tax. If this is done gradually, few people would notice the reduction in sugar. I, for one, would appreciate being able to have an SSB without feeling guilty about the amount of sugar consumed.

## **BAN ADVERTISEMENTS OF HIGH-SUGAR DRINKS**

**TY:** Advertisements do influence the choices of children, and exposure to those of food products high in fat, sugar and salt negatively shape their food preferences. A well-implemented ban on SSBs reduces exposure, and minimises influence from advertisements.

It needs to be properly enforced and extended to all media, including social and online media.

**JL:** The young are the most digitally savvy, and digital marketing typically is border-agnostic, or at least difficult to police based on national jurisdictions. Traditional media like print, television and radio can be more effectively policed.

**SK:** Difficult to enforce with the proliferation of social media. But a good idea if it can be done, given the strong influence of advertisements on buying behaviour. But would not be useful if ban is enforced only on some platforms.

## **HAVE COMPULSORY FRONT-OF-PACK NUTRITION LABEL**

**TY:** Good if it's a clear infographic that lets consumers do a quick evaluation. But may oversimplify due to the main focus on vilifying negative nutrients, rather than highlighting positive nutrients.

It can be confusing if traffic-light labels are used on the same product but for different categories such as for calories, fat, sugar and sodium. So the item may show both red and green.

**JL:** Good in theory, but the secret is in designing the label and information in ways that are fair, accurate and still appealing to consumers.

Consumers have to drink something, so the mental calculus is about alternatives and easy ways to compare one sugary drink against another.

There is some controversy over how useful the Healthier Choice Symbol has been and whether products with the symbol are actually healthy or less unhealthy. Again, it depends on what is being compared. If water is the standard, then everything else is bad!

**SK:** Support in principle, but has to be easy to understand, such as an overall rating of whether the food is good for health, neutral or bad for health.

The negative is that it might be too simplistic, or have too many falling into the neutral category – because it is low in one “bad” thing but high in another, such as low in sugar but high in salt and saturated fat. An alternative is to indicate for three or four categories of health concern.

This would make it more difficult for people to decide, but would provide more information. At the very least, it would make people more aware of what they are eating.

• Anyone who wants to give feedback on these measures can do so until Jan 25 at [www.reach.gov.sg/sugarydrinks](http://www.reach.gov.sg/sugarydrinks) or send e-mails to [sugary\\_drinks@hpb.gov.sg](mailto:sugary_drinks@hpb.gov.sg)