

Nutrient contents in student lunches show improvement

The Nutrient Testing of School Lunches in Primary Schools in Hong Kong 2018, jointly conducted by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department's Centre for Food Safety, has showed improvements in nutrient levels in lower primary school students' lunches across the territory. Among the results, the drop in average sodium content in lunches has met the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches' target for 2018.

Lunch samples were collected randomly from primary schools in Hong Kong for nutrient testing in January this year to examine the amount of energy and content of major nutrients in lunches of lower primary students. A total of 100 lunch samples were collected from 26 primary schools. Energy and nutrient values were compared against the requirements of a 7-year-old child according to the Chinese Dietary Reference Intakes (2013 edition) promulgated by the Chinese Nutrition Society and other overseas references.

Announcing the findings at a press conference today (August 29), the Assistant Director of Health (Health Promotion), Dr Anne Fung, said, "The testing revealed that the levels of total fats, saturated fats, trans fats and sugars in more than 90 per cent of the lunch samples were below the upper limits of recommended intake. Among them, the average amount of trans fats and sugars per lunch decreased by 7 per cent and 15 per cent respectively as compared with a similar survey in 2013.

"It is encouraging to see that the average sodium content per lunch has significantly dropped from 951 milligrams in a similar survey in 2013 to 818mg in this testing, representing a 14 per cent decrease."

Dr Fung added, "The DH launched the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches in the 2017/18 school year to reduce the sodium level of school lunches gradually with a recommended average annual reduction of 5 to 10 per cent, targeting to cut the average sodium level of primary school lunches down to not more than 500mg in 10 years. The average sodium content per lunch in this testing (818mg) has already met the Scheme's target for this year (reducing the level to less than 905mg)."

In the new school year (2018/19), 12 lunch suppliers participating in the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches will supply sodium-reduced lunches to about 480 primary schools in Hong Kong. The number of lunch options has increased from about 280 in September 2017 to over 1 200 in September this year.

The testing also revealed that the average dietary fibre content of the lunch samples was 5.1 grams. Although the average level exceeded the recommended intake of 4g, 40 per cent of the samples could not meet the

recommended level. Dr Fung pointed out that dietary fibre can help prevent constipation, control weight, lower the blood cholesterol level and prevent cardiovascular diseases while insufficient dietary fibre intake will increase the risk of colorectal cancer.

Meanwhile, the average protein content in the lunch samples was 21.6g, exceeding the recommended intake of 13.3g. Among them, the average protein content of non-vegetarian lunch samples was 1.8 times the recommended level, reaching 23.6g. Dr Fung stressed that while protein serves as an important nutrient for growth and development as well as a source of energy for the body, excessive protein intake will cause over consumption of energy and put extra burden on the liver and kidneys to get rid of uric acid and urea respectively.

To combat the threat of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the Government this year announced "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong", setting out nine local targets to be achieved by 2025, which include halting the rise in prevalence of raised blood pressure, diabetes and obesity as well as attaining a 30 per cent relative reduction in mean population daily intake of salt/sodium.

"Excessive intake of sodium can lead to hypertension, which is a major cause of cardiovascular diseases and stroke. The DH will continue to work with lunch suppliers to increase the number of sodium-reduced lunch options and raise the proportion of sodium-reduced lunch options provided each month, hoping to provide such options to more schools. Through these measures, we hope to gradually lower the sodium level of school lunches and work towards the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches' target of an average annual sodium reduction of 5 to 10 per cent," Dr Fung said.

Noting room for improvement in the amount of dietary fibre in school lunches, Dr Fung suggested that lunch suppliers should ensure at least one serving of vegetables is included in lunch and provide vegetables with higher fibre, and that the ratio of grains, vegetables and meat in lunch should be kept at 3:2:1, whereas the ratio of whole grains should be increased by enhancing the proportion of brown rice or vegetables in rice to at least 10 per cent. Dr Fung also suggested that schools co-operate with lunch suppliers and parents to ensure that students can consume at least one serving of fruits at school every day.

Co-operation between schools and parents is essential in encouraging students to adopt healthy eating habits at an early age. Schools can make reference to the ["Handbook of Selection of Lunch Suppliers"](#) published by the DH when choosing lunch suppliers, adopt the [Nutritional Guidelines on Lunch for Students](#) when drawing up contracts with lunch suppliers, and establish and implement a school healthy eating policy. Meanwhile, apart from co-operating with schools to monitor the quality of school lunches and providing adequate amount of fruits to children, parents can also follow healthy eating principles at home by consuming food that is low in fat, salt and sugar and eating less meat and more vegetables so as to lay a solid foundation for the

health of their children.

â€‹ "The results of the testing will help the DH review the Nutritional Guidelines on Lunch for Students, the Salt Reduction Scheme for School Lunches and other relevant measures to support our children to develop healthy eating habits and prevent NCDs. The DH will continue to provide necessary advice and assistance to schools, lunch suppliers and parents to further improve the nutrient contents in school lunches," Dr Fung added.