Are kids eating too much sweet stuff?

Study of pre-schoolers’ dietary habits among II research project on diabetes by NUS school

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When a public health don recently went to a fast-food outlet, he saw a mother pour Coke into a baby milk bottle—and feed it to her toddler. Anecdotally, Singapore’s young children seem to be consuming more sweet things, from sugared fruit juices and flavoured milk to cakes.

And a Straits Times check finds that only about one-third of all childcare centres in Singapore—or 427—are complying with the Government’s guidelines on healthy food for pre-schoolers, who are aged between three and six.

Funding set aside for II research projects on diabetes

$1 million

PRE-SCHOOL SERVING HEALTHY MEALS continued on B2
Healthy eating in daily routines

FROM B1

This has National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health dean Chia Kee Seng worried.

Young children who eat and drink sweetened food are at higher risk of diabetes when they grow up, he warned. This is because such habits will "condition them to consume more sweetened products as they grow older".

The NUS school will be spending $1 million on 11 research projects on diabetics, said Professor Chia yesterday. One area of focus is the lifestyle of Singapore's pre-schoolers.

National surveys on eating habits have been carried out only on adults above 18 years old, noted Prof Chia. "There hasn't been much in terms of studying and documenting those below six years of age. What do parents feed them? What are they eating? We don't have much information on that."

He added: "I'm not surprised they have all those damaged teeth."

The other two areas of research that the NUS school will be working on are obesity factors in young adults and the efficacy of health programmes in the workplace.

The projects were announced at the Singapore International Public Health Conference. Attended by about 600 researchers, healthcare professionals, policymakers and industry leaders from 25 countries, it discusses various diseases and their impact on population health.

Singapore has sought to lay down guidelines on what should be fed to pre-schoolers.

Four years ago, the Health Promotion Board started a Healthy Meals in Childcare Centre Programme (HMCCP) which stated that snacks should contain sugar content equal to or less than one tablespoon per serving. For sweetened drinks and desserts, sugar content should be equal to or less than 6g per 100ml.

Pre-schools that The Straits Times contacted said they are making the effort to introduce healthy eating into their daily routines.

NTUC First Campus, which is Singapore's second-largest pre-school chain with 143 centres, said two-thirds of its branches are accredited. Its charges are served meal options such as cereal with raisins and alphabet pasta soup.

Over at Carpe Diem @ ITE in Ang Mo Kio, director Tan Kah Hui said the childcare centre serves drinks with "very low sugar levels".

"We usually make barley water, chrysanthemum water or Milo for their meals such as breakfast and tea," he said, saying that for every litre of drinks, the centre adds just 30g to 40g of sugar.

"We also get them to drink a lot of plain water."

Miss Julia Jiang, director of Joy Little Schoolhouse in Sin Ming, said it first qualified for the HMCCP accreditation last year. Staff had to attend briefings by the Health Promo-

Prof Chia said children who eat and drink sweetened food are at higher risk of diabetes when they grow up.

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