High-sugar drinks taxed in many countries

Many countries tax pre-packaged drinks with high sugar content as a way to keep their citizens from overindulging. These include Singapore's neighbours such as Brunei and Thailand.

Among the early countries to do so was Finland, which has taxed sugar-sweetened drinks since 1985.

The most recent is Britain, which imposed a two-pence sugar tax in April this year. It taxes 24 Singapore cents per litre of packaged drinks with more than 5.5 g of sugar, and 44 cents when the sugar content exceeds 8 per cent.

Britain announced the tax in 2016, after half the drink manufacturers there reformulated their products to carry less sugar.

Thailand, which launched its tax last year, has four tiers. There is no tax on drinks which contain less than 6 per cent of sugar.

Generally, the goal of taxing sugar-sweetened beverages is to reformulate their drinks to be less sugary.

Even a small amount of tax, such as the three cents per litre on drinks with more than 8 g of sugar in Hungary, can change people's drinking patterns.

Hungary imposed a health tax in 2014 on a range of sugar-laden foods, including drinks, ice cream, jams and condiments. Within two years, the sales of taxed foods fell by 20 per cent.

Professor Erik Pfeifer of the Institute of Food Science and Technology in Hungary, said such taxes are needed if the industry is to reformulate its drinks to reduce the sugar content.

Several steps could help reduce sugar intake - and which Singapore is also considering - such as to ban or restrict advertisements of unhealthy food and drinks and get manufacturers to place prominent labels to indicate whether the food is healthy or not.

Some of these labels provide details of the amount of sugar, fat, and total calories in the product, while others use stars or traffic light symbols to indicate if the food is healthy or unhealthy.

Prof Finckenstein said most people ignore labels, but for those who don't, they have a way of knowing if what they are buying is healthy or not.

Prof Too said the key is to get people to take less sugar in their diet. If people go for healthier options, industries will follow suit, he said. "Pricing should be driven by products and consumer choices."

Professor Joona Darni, an epidemiologist at the Lee Kong Chian School of Public Health, agreed.

People should be told the nationwide message in terms of the importance for health by providing clear information on the amount of sugar in a beverage, he said.

He added that restricting advertisements of high-sugar drinks is important as these tend to appeal to children who are "less able to distinguish between factual information and advertisements".

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