



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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CAP: Sugar Tax should cover all High-Sugar Foods

The Consumers Association of Penang supports the call made by the Finance Minister that beverage manufacturers should lower the sugar content in their products to avoid paying sugar tax.

However, in their pursuit to lower the sugar content, beverage manufacturers should not be allowed to use substitutes which are more dangerous than sugar, for example the use of non nutritive sweeteners such as aspartame. Or the use of High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) which is more dangerous than sugar and it is used as a cheaper replacement for sugar in soft drinks.

Presently the excise duty is imposed on sweetened beverages at 40 sen per litre is only on two categories of ready- to- drink packaged sweetened drinks. As the aim of the government in introducing the tax is to curb obesity, diabetes and other health problems, it should focus on taxing all high-sugar foods and include all drinks where sugar is added.

Limiting the tax to only soft drinks may drive consumers to alternative sources of sugar; which works against the goal of the tax. There are many other foods – like ice-cream and biscuits – that could still lead to the overconsumption of sugar and drive consumers to be addicted to sugar.

The healthcare cost of obesity related illnesses is enormous in Malaysia, with estimates ranging from US\$1 to US\$2.1 billion according to a 2017 study by the *Asia Roundtable on Food Innovation for Improved Nutrition*. This works out to be about 10 to 19 percent of Malaysia's total spending on healthcare. With this in mind, there should be other initiatives the government should implement to tackle the problems of obesity and NCD which can be rolled out in tandem with the sugar tax.

In a recent study, researchers from Sorbonne Paris Cite University, reported that the consumption of just a small glass of sugary drink per day- 100 ml about a third of a typical can of soda to an 18 % increase in overall cancer risk and a 22% increase in risk for breast cancer.

In view of the present health conditions of Malaysians, CAP calls on the government to:

- > Impose stricter marketing regulations on high- sugar products especially where children's food are concerned.
- > Introduce mandatory nutritional information on the labelling of sugar content of ready- to drink beverages, biscuits and other foods which are high in sugar on the number of teaspoons of sugar it contain.
- > Conduct campaigns to highlight the risks of consuming food and drinks which are high in sugar.
- > Unhealthy foods that are high in fats, sugar, salt and additives should be discouraged by the introduction of taxes on such foods.

- > Educate Malaysians on the dangers of obesity and diabetes.
- > Have the traffic light system of food labels to indicate the unhealthy levels of sugar, salt and fats. This will give consumers a guide and easy indication of the amount of these ingredients.
- > Ban vending machines in schools, hospitals and other public places.

Taxation alone is not enough to curb the Malaysian addiction to sugar and a more holistic approach will be the key in creating a healthier population.

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