

## An Evaluation of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign in Hong Kong

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### Abstract

*The EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign has been launched since 2007 in order to cultivate a healthy eating habit in Hong Kong. EatSmart restaurants to provide customers with the healthier dishes, containing more vegetables and less oil, salt and sugar. This Campaign is a good way to encourage citizens to eat healthily when dining out. There are some deficiencies in its promotion, resulting in the unsustainability of the Campaign. The supervision of EatSmart restaurants is not enough and can hardly guarantee the quality of healthier dishes. Moreover, it cannot attract restaurants to join due to the lack of incentives and the tedious application process. The contents of promotion materials are also unclear. Although the Campaign has been implemented for around 9 years, the obesity rate is still increasing slightly. The effectiveness of the Campaign seems to be doubtful, while the Nutrition Labelling Scheme has been carried out successfully and more efficaciously. It is necessary to improve the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign. The Government plays a crucial role in this health promotional initiative, not only in its sustainability, but also in providing a supporting policy to enhance community awareness. The catering industry and restaurants are also the keys to the success of this Campaign in making the healthy eating choice an easy choice.*

*Keywords: EatSmart, obesity, healthy eating, eating out, government role, promotion strategies*

### Introduction

Many people in Hong Kong are overwhelmed with long working hours in this cosmopolitan city. Most of them are too busy and do not take care of their personal health, particularly regarding the importance of healthy eating. Hong Kong residents frequently eat out as part of the local culture. In a survey in 2012, only half of the respondents were concerned about the calories intake when they ate out (The University of Hong Kong, 2012). Another study has found more than 80 percent of people

consume inadequate fruits and vegetables daily, or less than 5 servings a day (Department of Health, 2016a). Such unhealthy dietary habit is the main contributor to obesity, resulting from excessive energy intake from high energy-dense food consumption and inadequate fiber intake. Moreover, eating behaviors may be motivated by external stimulations such as the unhealthy food advertisements.

It has been proven that healthy diet and adequate dietary fiber intake can prevent obesity (Slavin, 2005). The Government of Hong Kong implements different policies to promote healthy eating, including the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign and Nutrition Labelling Scheme. The influence of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign is far below expectation compared to the labelling scheme. This article will evaluate the effectiveness of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign in terms of its outcome and deficiencies, to compare the different healthy eating promotion programmes, and to give suggestions to bring about a greater influence on a local eating out habit.

### Obesity and eating behaviour

Obesity is associated with frequent dining out in Hong Kong (Ko et al, 2007a). A person, whose Body Mass Index is over or equal to 25.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, is classified as obese. The obese population in Hong Kong is about 20%, affecting nearly 15% of adult females and a third of adult males (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). Based on the data from Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System, about 40% eat out between two to four times a week. More remarkably, nearly one in ten people eat out at least five times or more a week (Centre for Health Protection, 2012a). However, restaurant dishes are often high in fat, sugar and salt, and the portion size of food has been getting larger. In the Baseline Survey for the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign (2007), more than half of the respondents have expressed that a serving size of vegetables and fruits is too few, whereas, fat is too much in food served in restaurants. Therefore, people who eat out may consume higher intakes of energy-dense foods than those who normally eat at home (Bezerra, Junior, Pereira & Sichieri, 2015). Undoubtedly, the risk of overweight and obesity may be increased.

In addition, unhealthy food advertisement may influence people's eating behaviour. Food companies have been increasing advertising for non-nutrition foods that may encourage the consumption of junk food. These foods are commonly high in calories and low in nutrients, and attribute significantly to obesity. For instance, a lot of fast food advertising is broadcasted on television these days. Many fast food restaurants advertise their products with an emphasis on low prices and big portions to attract more consumers. The promotion is reinforced by making health or wellbeing one of the popular advertising appeals such as 'Good for health'. In Hong Kong, there are more than six out of ten unhealthy food advertisements that promote at least one health-related claim (Chan, Leung & Tsang, 2013). It comes as no surprise that exposure to food advertising during television viewing contributes to obesity (Harris, Bargh & Brownell, 2009).

Unhealthy eating habits also bring out many negative effects on health, including diabetes and heart disease. These chronic diseases will increase morbidity and mortality, and raise the financial burden for health care. Therefore, the importance of healthy eating cannot be ignored. Without health, people can do nothing more. Health is regarded as a basic element of the society and for personal development. Eating habit is affected by social, economic, cultural and environmental factors, in either good or bad way (Ma, 2015). Therefore, health promotion should take good advantage of these factors to favour better and healthier eating behaviours.

The Government of Hong Kong implements various policies and activities to promote healthy eating so as to prevent overweight and obesity. The EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign was introduced in 2007 to change the unhealthy eating habit by educating the public and providing them with healthy choices. It also promoted healthy cooking in restaurants by attempting to build a friendly and healthy-eating environment with the aim to raise health consciousness when people eat out. Restaurants can provide customers with healthier meals and promote a healthy and balanced diet. The restaurants need to fulfill some requirements, and will pass an assessment to obtain the EatSmart Restaurants (ESR) door decal, which represents that they offer customers healthier food choices regularly.

These EatSmart Restaurants are expected to constantly provide EatSmart dishes - 'More Fruit and Vegetables' and '3 Less', i.e. less oil, salt and sugar, dishes. They benefit from the recognition of being socially responsible business operators, and from the support of Department of Health to enhance their nutritional knowledge and food quality. For patrons, there are advertisements and EatSmart Restaurants Coupon Promotional Activity to encourage them to dine in EatSmart restaurants (Department of Health, 2012).

### Evaluation of the Campaign

EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign aims to promote a healthy eating habit and decrease obesity rate in Hong Kong by raising healthy eating awareness and introducing EatSmart dishes for customers to choose. Before launching the Campaign, there was 78% of people having less than 5 servings of fruit and vegetables per day in 2008 (Centre for Health Protection, 2008). The figure increased slightly to 81% recently (Centre for Health Protection, 2014). Moreover, the number of people with overweight or obesity have been remaining at the similar level, more than one third, from 2007 to 2014 (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). The Campaign barely influenced on the eating behavior and the decrease of population with obesity-concern.

The Campaign appears to be ineffective in promoting healthy eating, and only very few restaurants support it. In 2016, there were more than 10,000 licenced restaurants, but only 661 restaurants joined the Campaign (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, 2017; Department of Health, 2017). The participation rate is very low indeed. Hence, the accessibility of EatSmart restaurants is practically limited.

Customers can hardly patronize and dine at EatSmart restaurants, leading to even fewer restaurants willing to join the Campaign because of the unfavourable operating environment. The EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign is no longer attractive to the restaurants (Centre for Health Protection, 2012b).

More importantly, the majority of participating ESRs belong to restaurant chains, and so there are few choices for the customers, let alone the healthier ones. Besides, the restaurants awarded the EatSmart decal are not monitored regularly. Hence, it cannot guarantee the quality of healthier dishes and to ensure whether the restaurant complies with the guidelines to offer customers healthier food.

### Sustainability of the Campaign Promotion

In 2008, when the Government first launched the Campaign with the aim to create a healthy eating environment for the public. Regular briefing sessions had been organized for staff of interesting restaurants. In addition, various activities were carried out to promote the Campaign, such as Smart Talks, dining offers, promotions at Food Expo, and the ESR Newsletter.

Sustainability of health promotion activities is very crucial in achieving the goal of promotion and in maintaining the benefits to the communities and population. A sustainable action will continue to be delivered within the available resources, such as the limits of finances, expertise and infrastructures (Smith, Kwok & Nutbeam, 2006). However, the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign has not been promoted continually. Consistency in efforts and activities are not evident.

**Table 1:** Smart talks by celebrities, chefs and dietitians in years 2013 to 2016.

Year	Celebrities	Chefs	Dietitians	Total
2013	18	5	9	32
2014	15	4	6	25
2015	15	5	9	29
2016	10	3	6	19

Source: Smart Talks [http://restaurant.eatsmart.gov.hk/eng/smarttalks\\_list\\_celebrities.asp](http://restaurant.eatsmart.gov.hk/eng/smarttalks_list_celebrities.asp)

The number of Smart Talks has decreased in the last few years as noted in Table 1. Moreover, only two EatSmart Restaurant Cooking Competitions were held in 2009 and 2010, with no more similar events held ever since. In 2015, the Secretary for Food and Health, officiated the "Kick Off Ceremony for Joyful Fruit Month @ EatSmart Restaurants" for EatSmart restaurants to provide a free serving of fruit to students. However, this was a once-off event in a new initiative of the Campaign. Another once-off event is also noted on the official website, and it is the "Fruity Recipe Competition", which was organized in 2013 with a view to encourage restaurants to provide more fruity choices for customers. By now, the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Newsletter appears to be the only Campaign tool. Even so, the number of issues has dropped from 5 to 7 issues in the first three years after launching the Campaign to only 3 in 2015 and 2016, with no production in the year 2014 (Department of Health, 2012)!

### Incentives to becoming ESR Restaurants and Quality Dishes

Although the restaurants can receive the decal to enhance their image and reputation, the incentive is not enough to attract more restaurants to join. Indeed, the application procedure is quite complicated as the restaurants need to design at least five EatSmart dishes and submit the EatSmart Recipes Submission Form, which contains a lot of items. Simultaneously, the staff should enroll via yet another form and attend the briefing session. Most restaurants may not have the resources or time to fully comply with the requirements. Therefore, due to the lack of tangible incentives, administrative supports and monetary subsidy, many are not willing to participate, resulting in a very low participation rate.

In terms of Campaign management, supervision of EatSmart restaurants is far from adequate. Although joining this Campaign is entirely voluntary, there is no supporting policy to maintain the Campaign, such as monitoring the EatSmart restaurants. Dishes with less sugar, oil and salt are not assured, apart from the submission of recipes upon registration. On top of this quality issue, there has been no innovative improvement since the launching of the Campaign. Nonetheless, the Government is still granting eligible restaurants decals but the outcome is doubtful.

### Problems of promotion materials and community awareness

The government made use of the promotion website, leaflets and posters to promote this Campaign, but there are problems with the promotion materials. According to the six-stage model of communication, it is necessary for a sender to let a receiver gain attention, understand and accept the message so as to change the behaviour in order to improve health (Rice & Atkin, 2012, p. 307). The posters and leaflets related to the Campaign only show the slogan, "*Dishes with less oil, sugar and salt*", without adding the gains from participation in the Campaign. The promotion materials do not convey the clear messages of the benefits of healthy eating and the disadvantages of continuing unhealthy eating habit. Thus, people cannot percept and interpret the messages of the Campaign adequately. As such, people are unlikely to change their behaviour. It is believed that the monotonous and unidirectional promotion materials have led the Campaign to failure.

Community awareness will add to the success of the Campaign. According to the Centre for Health Protection (2012b), there is a significant relationship between awareness of the Campaign and the consumption of healthier dishes. It has been shown that more than 90% of the people, who are not aware of the Campaign, would not choose EatSmart dishes. Many people do not really care about their dietary habit and would not actively seek for the information of health campaigns, even when there is a call for healthy eating out. So, when customers have no idea about the Campaign, they may refuse to try healthier dishes in the EatSmart restaurants, or simply turn to other restaurants. Therefore, the impact of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign in Hong Kong is very limited, partly due to the lack of advocacy in the community.

As a result, there are mainly three deficiencies in this Campaign, including unsustainability of campaign promotion, lacking inducement of becoming ESR restaurants, and using inappropriate promotion materials. Therefore, the Government should evaluate the outcomes regularly for improvement and modification of tools, including redesigning the posters, making them more informative. Moreover, the low community awareness of healthy eating would not make the Campaign successfully, particularly if sufficient and effective health promotional activities are lacking. Undoubtedly, the Government has introduced and implemented various policies and measure to raise the awareness of health issues in the society.

### Similar and related government initiatives

#### EatSmart@school.hk and StartSmart@school.hk in Schools

Apart from the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign, the Department of Health also launched EatSmart@school.hk and StartSmart@school.hk Campaigns in 2006 and 2011 respectively in order to cultivate students in healthy eating with a sustainable healthy lifestyle. The Government carries out promotional activities such as EatSmart School Accreditation Scheme and Joyful Fruit Month. Moreover, primary and secondary schools need to comply with the nutritional guidelines on lunch provision for students while pre-primary institutions should formulate healthy eating and physical activity school policy. Interventions targeting at the schools can make a significant impact, as the obesity detection rate of primary school students has been declining. In 2008, there are 22.2% of primary students being obese. But, the figure decreased gradually to 18.7% (Centre for Health Protection, 2016). Thus, the outcome of the promotion of healthy eating habit in schools is more effective and successful than in the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign as there are supporting policies and sustained promotion in schools.

#### Nutrition Labelling Scheme

Apart from the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign, the Nutrition Labelling Scheme was also released in 2007, with the mission to ensure that food sold in Hong Kong is safe and fit for consumption. Through the tripartite collaboration among the Government, food trade and consumers, the scheme is far more successful. The Scheme is empowering people to make better food choices in purchasing, and regulating the misleading or deceptive nutritional claims and labels. The amount of energy and seven nutrients, protein, carbohydrates, total fat, saturated fatty acid, trans fatty acid, sodium and sugar, also known as the (1+7) labels, are required on most of the pre-packaged food as the World Health Organisation recommends (Centre for Food Safety, 2016).

Nutrition labelling is mandatory. Citizens no longer blindly access the food information from advertisements. The Scheme helps them make better purchasing choices. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has frequent press releases and achieves over forty publications in peer-reviewed journals throughout these years. In addition,

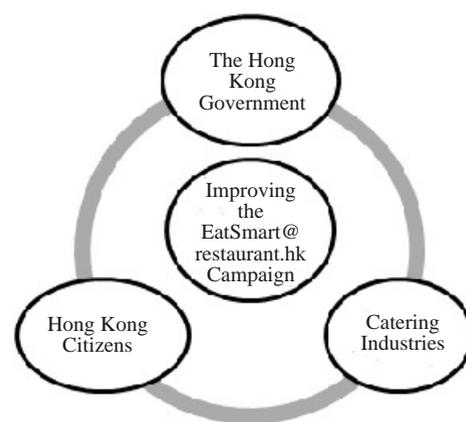
annual Trade Consultation Forums are held to provide a platform for CFS to exchange views on food safety matters and to conduct risk communication with various food trade associations. There are also several continuing promotional activities and continuing training programmes. Courses about nutrition labelling are conducted in centres of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, schools and community centres to enrich the knowledge among the general public (Centre for Food Safety, 2017a). Roving exhibitions, which include exhibition, video display, games and souvenir distribution, are held at various places such as housing estates and shopping malls to reach residents of different socioeconomic status. More importantly, the continuous promotion can refresh the knowledge of nutrition labelling of the public to keep them alert in choosing health food, leading to enhanced community awareness (Centre for Food Safety, 2017b).

These nutrition labelling promoting strategies are more diversified. There are more interactions with the public and consumers, compared to the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign that has relied on overwhelmingly on printed materials such as promotion website, leaflets and posters. Overall, the continuous promotions of the labelling scheme are the key to its sustainability and have made the Scheme more effective and long-lasting to the community than the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign.

### Improving the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign

The EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign should be re-examined and improved, making reference to the successful policies and activities described in the last section. The government, catering industries and citizens should support the Campaign jointly to make it work for the community and the industry in a structural model shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Proposed Model



#### The Government's role

The Government plays the key role in all public policies and initiatives, particularly in community health practices. Actions by the Government are crucial to

the effectiveness and sustainability of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign. More continuing interactions among the Government, medium and catering industry shall facilitate the success of the Campaign. Instead of just releasing the online newsletter on the official website, the Government should promote the Campaign vigorously, widely and regularly through different mass media, such as newspapers, radio and television to raise the community awareness. Furthermore, tactful utilization of the social media can effectively refresh the memory of the people about healthy eating, particularly the younger population. The government can also, in collaboration with the ESR restaurants, recruit high school students to act as Campaign Ambassadors to promote and educate the community directly on how to select the EatSmart dishes. This can be done in conjunction with the EatSmart@school.hk Campaign as a synergistic activity. Regular marketing can also boost up the demand of the population due to the increased publicity. Therefore, with an increase in public awareness of healthy eating, more people will be expected to attempt to choose healthy dishes in EatSmart restaurants.

According to the Health Belief Model, perceived susceptibility has been found to be predictive of health promotion behaviours, and people will be more motivated to behave in healthy ways if they are vulnerable to a particular negative health outcome (Orji, Vassileva & Mandryk, 2012). So, promotional materials in leaflets and posters should include information on the disadvantages and consequences of unhealthy eating habits in order to introduce a cue to arouse people's awareness, and to drive people to change their eating behaviour. On the other hand, promotional materials for restaurants should state the benefits of joining the Campaign, including incentives, so as to attract more restaurants to join. When the participation rate is increasing, non-participating restaurants may begin to consider joining this Campaign.

The Government should also provide a supporting policy to the Campaign, in order to uphold the food quality and, at the same time, to encourage restaurants to join. The Department of Health can provide more and regular training to restaurant operators and staff, in addition to the "once-off" briefing sessions. It will help them know better the healthy meal standards and how to improve and enhance nutritional values of recipes. At the same time, the Department should visit and evaluate the EatSmart restaurants more frequently to make sure they offer the dishes with less oil, salt and sugar. The ESR restaurants must be supported and assisted. As a practical gadget, measuring spoons can be provided to remind them to avoid adding an excessive amount of unhealthy ingredients. Additionally, the application procedures of EatSmart restaurants should be simplified and be much more user-friendly.

#### Initiatives of the catering industry

Equally important, initiatives of the industry are also the key to the success of the Campaign. The catering industry has a responsibility to co-operate with and be responsive to the Government's policy to promote the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign as well. They can encourage and assist the restaurants to enroll in the Campaign. Moreover, the industry may help to change Hong Kong's eating culture, and

to convince the public that dishes contain less sugar, salt, and oil can also be delicious. Chefs and restaurant operators can be educated to change their belief and alter their practice. Using less of the condiments, the dishes can still be as tasteful and attractive but healthier.

Restaurant operators must understand the aims and objectives of the Campaign. As good citizens, they have the corporate social responsibility to help to maintain the customers' health through the provision of healthier food choices. ESR restaurants can display prominent and attractive healthy eating posters, with clear messages about the benefits of healthy diet and disadvantages of unhealthy food, on the walls and around the dining hall to remind patrons to pay attention to eating habits and to choose the healthy dishes.

The media have spot-checked ESR restaurants and have found dishes not meeting the standards or being below the WHO standards. Such incidents may affect the reputation of EatSmart restaurants and jeopardise the efforts of government adversely. At times, when a participating restaurant fails to meet the requirements, follow-up actions should be carried out by both the Government and the industry, in order to uphold the quality of food and hence the trust of the public (Centre for Health Protection, 2012b). Apart from the current annual evaluation, spot-checks by the Department are recommended in order to keep the customers' faith and confidence in eating out at EatSmart restaurants. "Irregular" checking can encourage the ESR restaurants to be more vigilant and alert in their services. Essentially, the Government, the catering industry and the media ought to collaborate more closely in a coordinated effort to make the Campaign a success for the long-term benefits of the people of Hong Kong.

### **Community awareness and customer actions**

EatSmart is not merely a slogan to advocate healthy eating habit and to change people's undesired eating patterns. The effectiveness and outcome may not be satisfactory as expected with the lack of community awareness of healthy eating. Fewer customers eating at ESR restaurants have resulted in fewer restaurants willing to join the Campaign due to the unfavorable environment. According to the report conducted by Centre for Health Protection (2012b), there is a significant relationship between awareness of the Campaign and the consumption of healthier dishes that people who are not aware of the Campaign. More than eight in ten people have indicated that they would be attracted by the EatSmart restaurants, if they have known the Campaign, and more than 90% of them do not choose EatSmart dishes. Indeed, the Government, together with the catering industry and restaurant operators, should enhance public knowledge in the community to facilitate customer actions (Centre for Health Protection, 2012b).

However, healthy eating out should not be the sole responsibility of the Government nor the catering industry alone. The general public should support the

EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign by patronizing ESR restaurants. These customers will then encourage more restaurants to join the Campaign. Indeed, some healthier ingredients are perishable easily, such as farm-fresh vegetables and fresh meats. Hence, a reasonable turnover is needed to keep the ingredients from being wasted or thrown into the bins. More business would indirectly help to guarantee the quality of food. In addition, customer surveys should be conducted to obtain opinions and feedback about the choices, quality and taste of the healthy dishes so that restaurants can improve the menu to better serve the customers.

The findings can also enhance and strengthen personal autonomy in the face of health risks as people learn more about their personal health risks (Bayer, Gostin, Jennings & Steinbock, 2007). The community can constantly receive the message that high oil, sugar and salt intake may increase the risks of obesity and heart diseases. Practically, healthier dishes and healthy eating out should become more attractive to the customers, making the healthy food order an easy choice for the community. Through the joint cooperation of various stakeholders, the "EatSmart@restaurant.hk" Campaign can be sustainable and successful.

### **One single EatSmart Campaign**

Originally the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign is designated to be a primary prevention initiative. It would help to prevent the onset of diet-related diseases in order to reduce the incidence in the long term. In fact, the Campaign is a good public health strategy to promote healthy eating as it really fits in Hong Kong people's eating out culture, and to prevent the negative effects on health, such as obesity, high blood pressure and heart diseases. In fact, the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign has achieved some success at the very beginning, in that television advertisements, printed promotional materials and celebrity effect make it well-known.

Due to the lack of continuing efforts, the campaign seems to come to "an end". In contrast to the EatSmart@school.hk and StartSmart@school.hk Campaigns and the Nutrition Labelling Scheme, the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign is short of continuous promotion. The only publicity activities are the two Newsletters, appearing about three times a year. There are no press releases nor public forums as in the other programmes.

The Department of Health should seriously consider running the three campaigns as a single EatSmart Campaign (<https://www.eatsmart.gov.hk/>) to allow for a better coordinated, and more effective health-promoting programme. Efficiency can be achieved through the economies of scale of coverage and the avoidance of duplication of efforts. Healthy eating culture should cover the entire population, although it is desirable to begin with the young children. There is also much to be gained from joining the EatSmart Campaign with the Nutrition Labelling Scheme, which is not only concerned about food safety, but bodily health as well. Furthermore, regular and systematic review of all the food and eating programmes is an equally essential task so

that the Government can assure the effectiveness of these activities and improve the programmes, based on evidence.

### Conclusion

Owing to the eating habit and culture, and the sedentary lifestyle of Hong Kong people, people frequently eat out and have few serving sizes of vegetables and fruits. These factors may increase the risk of suffering from obesity-related health problems. Therefore, the Hong Kong Government have endeavored to launch different schemes, programs and policies to promote and improve public health and wellness, including EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign as well as the Nutrition Labelling Scheme. However, there are several inadequacies in the promotional strategies of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign, particularly the sustainability of the promotion and problems of promotional materials. If the government care to pay more attention to health issues and to diligently re-evaluate the outcomes of this Campaign, it is the authors' strong belief that the increasing prevalence of obesity in the local population can be effectively decreased by creating a healthy-eating-out environment in the long run. More efforts by the Government and the industry are required in further improving the Campaign. It is time for food and health officials to seriously review the programs and to make practical changes for the benefits of our community.

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