

## SINGAPORE

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PRICE OF A LITRE OF  
92-OCTANE PETROL AT  
CALTEX, ESSO AND SPC | B40% sugar level does not mean  
your drink has no sugarUpcoming nutrition labels for  
freshly prepared drinks can sieve  
out those with 'hidden sugars'Amanda Lee  
Consumer Correspondent  
and Lee Li Ying

That zero per cent sugar level for milk tea does not mean no sugar: a 400g serving of such a drink contains 1.2 teaspoons of sugar.

Add tapioca pearls to it, and it goes up to almost three teaspoons of sugar.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a dietitian at Aptima Nutrition, said tapioca starch, which is converted to sugars by the human body, is one of the ingredients in these pearls.

As for the tea, the sugar can be found in the milk or creamer added to it, she added.

On Aug 11, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung announced that by the end of next year, outlets selling freshly prepared drinks that have a

very high level of sugar and saturated fat content must label them with a Nutri-Grade mark. These drinks include bubble tea, freshly squeezed juices and freshly brewed coffee.

The Nutri-Grade mark will also apply to pre-packaged drinks with higher sugar and saturated fat content from Dec 30 this year.

Based on a 2018-2019 National Nutrition Survey, Singaporeans consume, on average, 12 teaspoons of sugar daily.

The Health Promotion Board recommends keeping sugar intake to no more than 10 per cent of one's daily energy intake. This works out to be about 45g to 55g, or nine to 11 teaspoons, of sugar a day for adults.

Experts said the Nutri-Grade mark will help consumers make more informed choices when they select freshly prepared drinks.

Principal dietitian Bibi Chia at Raffles Diabetes and Endocrine Centre said the Nutri-Grade mark might encourage consumers to select or ask for lower-sugar or lower-fat options. It might also encourage drink sellers to create healthier choices on their menu,



Bubble tea contains hidden sugars because its pearls are made of tapioca starch, which is converted to sugars in the body. Experts said the Nutri-Grade mark will help consumers make more informed choices when they select freshly prepared drinks.

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she noted.

And some food and beverage outlets already do so, according to The Straits Times' checks.

Mr Malcolm Yeo, deputy general manager at home-grown gourmet coffee chain O' Coffee Club, said besides sugar-free beverages, the

chain offers options such as oat milk and almond milk in their coffee and tea drinks.

Bubble tea chains such as Playmade and Milksha allow their customers to choose the sugar levels in their drinks, including a zero per cent sugar option.

Playmade's marketing manager, Ms Charlene Chen, said most of its customers opt for zero per cent or 25 per cent sugar level options.

Some chains, such as LIHO Tea, offer natural sweeteners such as stevia, while others – including Playmade – are looking to tweak their recipes to offer healthier choices.

Aptima's Ms Reutens said such sweeteners have the same or higher level of sweetness but fewer calories than regular sugar.

Office manager Sally Ang, who drinks bubble tea twice a week, is aware there could be hidden sugars in her drink. She mitigates it by choosing the zero per cent sugar level for her milk tea with pearls.

But experts say consumers may have to go further. Associate Professor Verena Tan, programme leader of the dietetics and nutrition programme at the Singapore Institute of Technology, said apart from choosing low-sugar or low-calorie versions of bubble tea, they could also opt for healthier toppings such as aloe vera, or not add any toppings.

Mr Goh Qiu Le, a dietitian at Changi General Hospital, concurred: "Water should be our go-to beverage. If that's not possible, it is prudent to opt for drinks with lower sugar content."

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## Bubble tea chains preparing for roll-out of nutrition labels

Bubble tea chains are brewing up plans to reformulate their offerings that are highest in sugar and saturated fat, to avoid an advertising ban on such drinks when a new nutrition labelling scheme for freshly made beverages kicks in by end-2023.

Three out of five operators that The Straits Times spoke to – Heytea, Milksha and Playmade – said they are likely to tweak the recipes of drinks with high levels

of sugar and saturated fat.

Earlier this month, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung announced that drink outlets selling freshly prepared drinks that have a very high level of sugar and saturated fat content must label them with a Nutri-Grade mark in their menus by the end of next year.

He said the Government is working towards publishing measures for freshly made drinks in the middle of next year.

A four-level Nutri-Grade system will be used to label pre-packaged drinks from Dec 30 based on their sugar and saturated fat content. The system classifies drinks into four grades, A to D. Beverages rated D are the unhealthiest and will face an advertising ban. Drinks with C and D grades must be labelled.

Milksha's general manager Joseph Lim said the brand – which has 12 outlets here – hopes to have

most of its beverages in the healthier grades to avoid the advertising ban and its challenge would be to reduce saturated fat because it uses full-cream milk in its products.

Low-fat milk could be used instead, but that could affect the taste of the drink, and customers may not be used to it, he said.

"The workaround is to offer more choices. We could offer the full-cream milk option, which is

the original taste, and in line with the new regulations, we could offer low-fat milk or even plant milk, but with that, we could face a situation of wastage."

Heytea Singapore's brand director Jonathan Chan said the brand – which has five outlets here – would prefer not to have an advertising ban for any of its drinks as it prides itself on offering healthier drinks with natural ingredients.

He added that there is a dedi-

cated research and development team in the brand's headquarters in China looking into reformulating the drinks.

While operators say the one-year preparation time is sufficient, some are calling for the authorities to offer clarity and assistance over the roll-out of the scheme, including financial support to defray im-

**SOME UNCERTAINTY continued on B2**