

Media Release

21 November 2016

Trials demonstrate appetite for healthy choices

VicHealth is calling on food retailers to reduce fatty, sugary and salty foods and beverages for sale and increase the amount of fresh, healthy and nutritious food available for consumers in a bid to tackle Australia's obesity epidemic.

It comes as a Deakin University evaluation of three healthy eating trials undertaken in key public settings, funded by VicHealth, reveals that reducing the availability of unhealthy food and drinks and increasing the availability of healthy items has little to no effect on revenue.

Using the Victorian Government's Healthy Choices: food and drink classification guide, which categorises items according to their nutritional value using a traffic light system, the evaluation, conducted by Professor Anna Peeters, found significant decreases in the sale of 'red' coded items (limit intake) sold which were supplemented by a rise in sales of 'green' (best choice) and 'amber' coded (choose carefully) items.

The evaluation tested the health costs and benefits of implementing healthy eating policies in healthcare and sports and recreation facilities by analysing the outcomes of trials and programs at YMCA Victoria, City of Melbourne and Alfred Health.

YMCA Victoria introduced a healthy food and beverage policy in 2014 that is being implemented over three years across the organisation's 70 aquatic and recreation centre kiosks and cafes. As part of the policy, YMCA Victoria initiated a 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign which aimed to phase out soft drink consumption by December 2015.

The evaluation was based off comparative sales for nine YMCA sites in June 2016 and June 2014.

Key findings include:

- the proportion of available ready-to-drink drinks that were coded 'green' increased from 32% to 66% while the proportion 'red' coded drinks decreased from 62% to 25%.
- The reduction in sugary 'red' coded drinks equates to 757 litres less of 'red' drinks sold over the nine centres per month. This is the equivalent of 2,000 fewer cans of soft drink consumed on a monthly basis.
- Sales analysis showed that while there was a clear decrease in the total beverage dollar sales for 'red' coded drinks, there was no change in overall beverage dollar sales.

The City of Melbourne gradually reduced the availability of items in its North Melbourne Recreation Centre seasonal café over a five-year period under the 'Green Light, Eat Right' program. In 2014, the majority of red coded items were removed as part of a 'no red' trial.

Key findings include:

- A clear decrease in the number of red coded items on offer after the introduction of the 'no red' trial and an increase in the number of 'amber' and 'green' coded items available
- Total sales revenue per visitation declined immediately after the 'No Red' trial by about 15% but remained stabilised after the initial decline
- The trial resulted in a sharp decline in 'red' coded products sold, alongside an increase in sales of 'green' and 'amber' coded products.

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Alfred Health introduced a healthy food and beverage policy in 2012 implemented at food outlets, vending machines and catering across the organisation.

The retail outlet trialled methods to promote healthy eating including taking 'red' coded drinks off display, decreasing portion sizes, increasing the range of 'green' food options like of sushi, salads and yoghurt, minimising fried food and pricing healthy food lower than unhealthy food. 'Red' beverages were increased in price by 20% in vending machines to disincentivise purchase of unhealthy drinks. The evaluation was based on a retail food outlet and vending machines at one Alfred Health site.

Key findings include:

- There was not a significant impact on sales
- The increased availability of fresh foods including sushi and salad improved business for the retail outlet
- No significant financial loss for the vending machines, which showed an increase sales of 'green' and particularly 'amber' drinks and a decrease in 'red' drinks sales.

Prof Peeters said the evaluation clearly demonstrated the health benefits of implementing healthy eating policies in key public health settings, without impacting an organisation's bottom line.

"With strong organisational commitment, sustained change in availability of healthy and unhealthy food and drink is possible in community food retail settings and leads to large changes in customer purchasing patterns," Prof Peeters said.

"The trials demonstrated the willingness of people to switch to a healthier option if their first choice of food or drink was unavailable and also highlights that many Victorians actually want to make healthier choices when eating out."

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said the trials demonstrated the critical role food retailers in healthcare and sports settings play in improving the availability of healthy food and drinks.

"Almost two thirds of adult Australian are overweight or obese and if the current trends continue, nearly three-quarters of Australians will be overweight or obese in 2025," Ms Rechter said.

"Consumers need support in making healthy choices when eating out and the success of these trials shows that customers have embraced the changes and that businesses can implement healthy eating policies without a significant hit to their bottom line.

"The successful implementation of healthy eating policies and trials at Alfred Health, YMCA Victoria and The City of Melbourne serve as a shining example of what can be achieved through strong leadership and a commitment to providing better quality food and drinks.

The evaluation provides useful recommendations for organisations wanting to undertake similar policy changes to reduce the availability of unhealthy food and drinks.

For details and resources, visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/easychoice

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