

For Immediate Release

May 16th 2023

WHO says No to Artificial Sweeteners for Childhood Obesity

A new guideline issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on May 15th recommends against the use of non-sugar sweeteners as a means of controlling obesity and risks to non-communicable diseases. This new guideline has been issued just weeks after the Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training implemented the Barbados School Nutrition Policy, which removed sugar sweetened drinks and drinks with artificial sweeteners from schools across Barbados.

The guideline can be seen as encouraging given the bold step by the Ministry to remove sugary drinks from schools, and as the Ministry works with its stakeholders to identify no sugar alternative beverages.

The WHO explains that this recommendation is based on “the findings of a systematic review of the available evidence which suggests that use of non-sugar sweeteners does not confer any long-term benefit in reducing body fat in adults or children. Results of the review also suggest that there may be potential undesirable effects from long-term use of non-sugar sweeteners, such as an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mortality in adults.”

"Replacing free sugars with non-sugar sweeteners does not help with weight control in the long term. People need to consider other ways to reduce free sugars intake, such as consuming food with naturally occurring sugars, like fruit, or unsweetened food and beverages," says Francesco Branca, WHO Director for Nutrition and Food Safety. "Non-sugar sweeteners are not essential dietary factors and have no nutritional value. People should reduce the sweetness of the diet altogether, starting early in life, to improve their health."

Francine Charles, Programme Manager of the Childhood Obesity Prevention Programme at the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados notes, “the timing of this WHO guideline will certainly harness the energies of all stakeholders along with the Ministry of Education towards creating an environment with the right alternatives for our children to consume which can greatly assist with them having healthier diets.” This new recommendation, is obviously linked to the suite of existing policies which the WHO advocates to fight childhood obesity, with the aim to establish lifelong healthy eating habits, improve dietary quality and decrease the risk of NCDs worldwide.”

According to the WHO, “The recommendation applies to all people except individuals with pre-existing diabetes and includes all synthetic and naturally occurring or modified non-nutritive sweeteners that are not classified as sugars found in manufactured foods and beverages or sold on their own to be added to foods and beverages by consumers. Common non-sugar sweeteners include acesulfame K, aspartame, advantame, cyclamates, neotame, saccharin, sucralose, stevia and stevia derivatives.

The recommendation does not apply to personal care and hygiene products containing non-sugar sweeteners, such as toothpaste, skin cream, and medications, or to low-calorie sugars and sugar alcohols (polyols), which are sugars or sugar derivatives containing calories and are therefore not considered non-sugar sweeteners.

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In Barbados, Childhood obesity remains an alarming public health concern, with 31% of children considered obese and overweight; to ensure a generation of healthy leaders and citizens, societal and policy approaches are required now.

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