



The SFDA's Comprehensive Approach to Health and Nutrition:

Exploring the Multifaceted Food
Strategy to Tackle Obesity and
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In recent years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a surge in health problems related to obesity, high cholesterol and elevated blood pressure. Recognising the urgent need for intervention, the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) has devised a multifaceted strategy to address these issues. This article will delve into the SFDA's efforts to promote healthy eating habits, improve nutritional awareness and combat rising obesity-related conditions in the Kingdom.

Healthy Food Strategy

Statistics indicate that 43% of Saudis suffer from high cholesterol levels and 4% from diabetes, while 14% grapple with elevated blood pressure. Childhood obesity rates are equally concerning, at 6% and 9.3% for preschool and school-aged children, respectively. In response, in 2018 the SFDA launched the Healthy Food Strategy. This initiative constitutes a diverse approach to promoting and improving public health through dietary changes. One key part involves the mandatory disclosure of caloric information on menus, a measure that commenced as a voluntary pledge in 2017 and was later made a law in 2019. This initiative targets restaurants, hotels and cafes to empower individuals to make healthier choices when dining out. In 2019 the Kingdom implemented a new policy requiring that establishments disclose allergens on their menus. The regulation of nutrient composition in beverages (fruit juices, fruit drinks and nectars) further supports the strategy by encouraging businesses to abstain from adding sugars to their products.

The Healthy Food Strategy extends to food manufacturing practices, as seen in the ban on partially hydrogenated oils that took effect in 2020. This policy encourages manufacturers to reformulate their products to remove industrially produced trans-fat (TFA), in line with broader efforts to reduce TFA consumption. Sodium reduction is addressed through mandates that enact limits for various food categories and products, emphasising collaboration with manufacturers to reformulate offerings.

The strategy is aligned with Vision 2030, as well as the World Health Organisation's recommendations for reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases. In addition, the SFDA has been collaborating with public and private sector players, as exemplified by the pledge signed in conjunction with the inauguration of the Healthy Food Strategy by national and international corporations. Recognising the importance of the private sector, the SFDA is actively engaging with private companies to understand the challenges they face and find common ground through a series of workshops and dialogues. Moreover, the SFDA extends invitations to companies to voluntarily commit to health-oriented initiatives, culminating in the issuance of certificates acknowledging their efforts.

Community Awareness

The SFDA has led a series of educational campaigns as part of the Healthy Food Strategy, such as an awareness campaign that advocates for augmented fibre intake, while also discouraging the consumption of saturated and trans fats. By advocating for healthier cooking methods and substituting conventional juice drinks with fresh alternatives, the

campaigns seek to reshape the culinary landscape, promoting nutritional consciousness among consumers.

Beyond individual dietary choices, the SFDA has extended its influence among corporate entities through its collaboration with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. Launched in 2021, the focus of the initiative was to heighten awareness about the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables. The initiative included the dissemination of education materials and infographics on nutrition by email, as well as on television screens within firms.

Targeted Initiatives for Children

Understanding the importance of establishing healthy habits at a young age, the SFDA is working to institute guidelines to govern marketing practices. As children are highly susceptible to food marketing, the SFDA has instituted voluntary guidelines in Saudi Arabia to restrict the marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks to children younger than 12 years of age. These guidelines encompass all media outlets – including social media – and define unhealthy foods based on specific nutritional criteria, addressing concerns related to fat, saturated fat, sodium and added sugar content.

Monitoring and Enforcement

The SFDA's commitment to its initiatives is evident in its rigorous monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Non-compliance with mandatory policies is treated as a legal violation, followed by warning letters and legal action. For voluntary policies, the SFDA provides guidelines and support to encourage compliance.

Conclusion and Outlook

Due to the Healthy Food Strategy's policies, the non-compliance of certain actors in the food services sector and the high costs of laboratory analyses, the SFDA has introduced a user-friendly calorie calculation app, as well as has engaged accredited freelancers to count calories. To raise further awareness, the SFDA leads workshops and issues guidelines to simplify the process and make calorie counting more accurate.

The SFDA's strategies and policies represent a pioneering effort to transform the nutritional landscape and promote public health. Through the Healthy Food Strategy's diverse approach encompassing private sector engagement, regulatory frameworks, transparency and targeted initiatives, the SFDA is helping create a healthier, better-informed population. By addressing the challenges head on and leveraging international best practices, the SFDA is poised to lead the Kingdom towards a future of improved public health.

