

POLICY BRIEF

UNLOCKING HEALTHIER CHOICES: STRENGTHENING FOOD RETAIL-RELATED POLICIES FOR AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE NUTRITIOUS OPTIONS

Key messages or highlights

The South East Asia Obesogenic Food Environment (SEAOFE) Study is a 4 country study, aimed to analyse the food retail environment, consumers' and retailers' perspectives regarding the food retail environment, and existing policies influencing food retail in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Below are the findings for Malaysia:

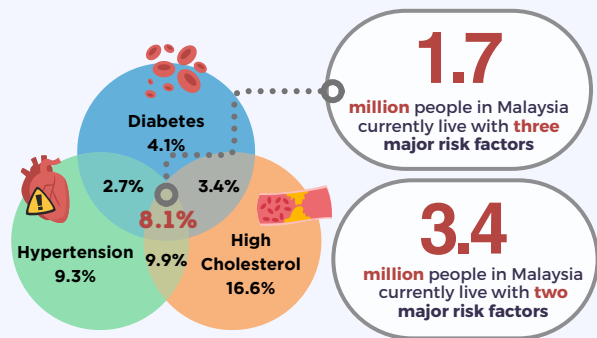
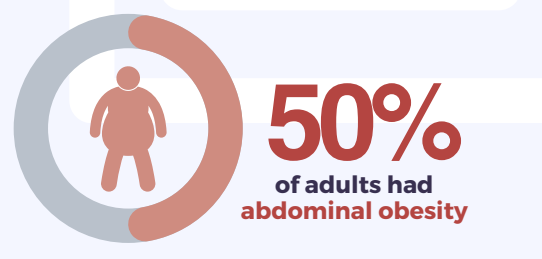
- Modern markets are the main industry players in food retail in Malaysia.
- Consumer purchase preferences across different food retailers are essential items, processed foods and confectionaries.
- Factors influencing food purchases among consumers are affordable prices (91.2%), easy access (89.9%) and familiarity (86.6%).
- More than half of food items sold across food retailers are discretionary* food products (56.2%).
- Barriers to stock healthy food products are based on low consumer demand, healthy food are expensive, balancing consumer-business interests and addressing retail monopolies.
- The role of the government in food retail needs to be strengthened. Opportunities should be given to young people to be involved in the agriculture sector to improve the food supply chain and food system in the country.
- Key facilitators to improve food retail policies include collaborative governance and strategic company practices for improving healthy food accessibility and affordability. Barriers comprise of regulatory clarity issues, implementation challenges, and policy gaps.

Note;

* Discretionary food; Foods high in saturated fats, sugars, salt and/or alcohol that can be included occasionally in small amounts, but are not a necessary part of the diet (Australian Dietary Guideline, 2013).

Problem: Battling Malaysia's Nutrition Crisis

Non-communicable diseases among adults in Malaysia are worrying-According to NHMS (2019). A total of 1.7 million people currently live with 3 major risk factors (diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol). The presence of an obesogenic environment significantly influences the emergence of these alarming statistics.



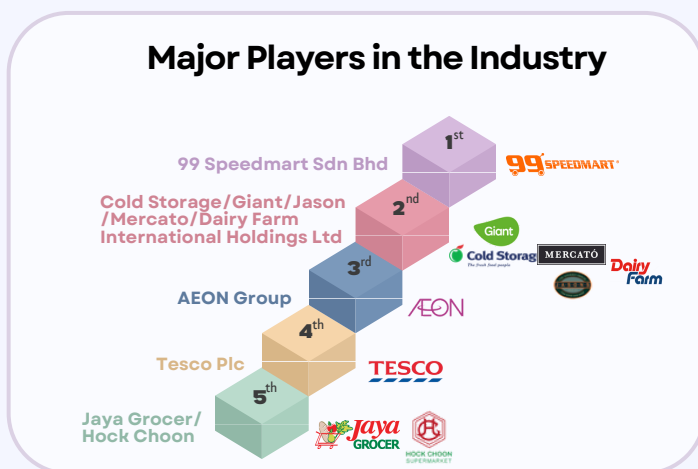
Source: NHMS 2019

Solution: A Bold Policy Shift for Better Healthier Dietary Choices

Promoting a supportive food environment that ensures the accessibility and affordability of healthy food is a strategic and viable solution to enhance community dietary intake. Contrary to the perception that healthy food is expensive, the key is to increase the availability and affordability of nutritious options across all types of retailers nationwide. Achieving this goal requires a comprehensive approach within the complex food system, involving various stakeholders such as the support from the Inter-Government Sector, food retailers, academia/researchers and NGOs.

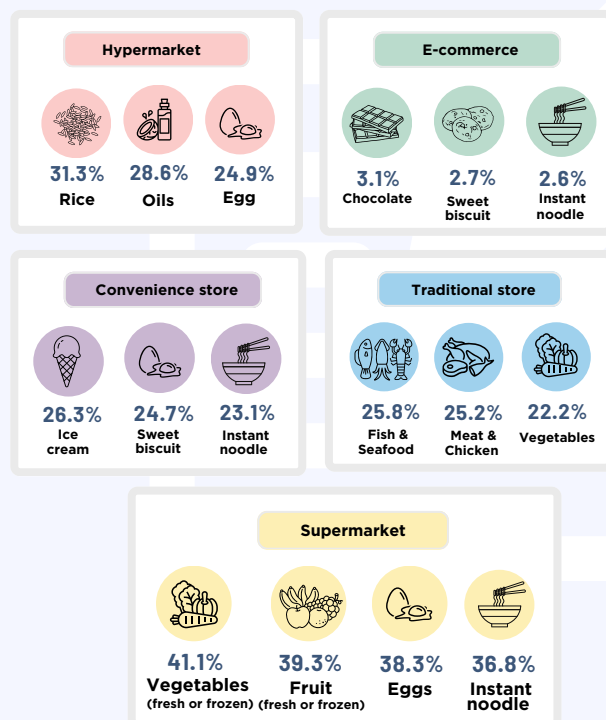
To effectively implement these efforts, powerful policy actors need to work together and strengthen the policies for retailers to do their work and consumers to have a healthier food environment. This can be done by increasing both the supply and demand for healthy foods in the market. While this approach is not entirely new, it demands a systemic strategy for optimal effectiveness.

Evidence: Bridging the Gaps for Healthier Choices

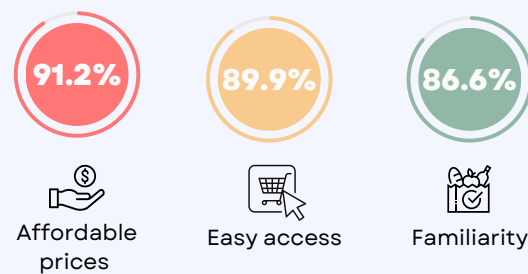


Ref: Euromonitor International 2020

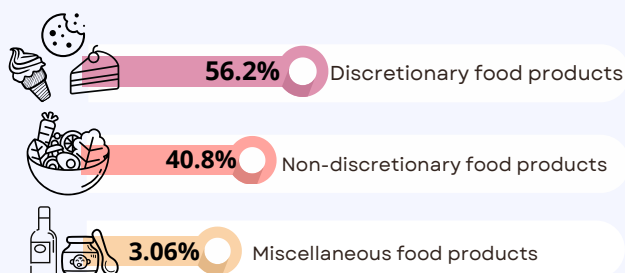
The majority of consumers' purchase preferences across different food retailers are:



Factors influencing food purchases among consumers are:



Percentage of food products in food retail in this study:



Facilitators and barriers to enhance the accessibility and affordability of healthy food in retail sectors

Facilitators	Barriers
<p>Governmental administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a Cabinet Committee to foster collaboration between ministries • Implementation of ministry/agency engagement and coordination platforms • Development of acts and regulations on price control, food standards and labelling, agricultural marketing agencies, and enforcement • Implementation of initiatives promoting healthier food choices <p>Food retailers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation to the changing retail landscape to meet the evolving needs of retailers and consumers <p>Consumers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer characteristics play a significant role in driving the shift towards healthier food options • Community engagement is crucial, cost-effective, and accessible for promoting healthy eating habits, leveraging peer community efforts for effective communication. 	<p>Governmental administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of regulation for healthy and unhealthy food standards • Emphasis on treating health outcomes rather than prevention in health policies • Challenges in incentivizing healthier food production • Gap in nutrition policy implementation • Overlap and lack of coordination among governmental agencies <p>Food retailers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles in balancing consumer and business interests • Navigating through retail monopolies • Addressing influence from stakeholders <p>Consumers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of lifestyle changes on dietary habits • Lack of health awareness and understanding of nutrition • Consumer demand influenced by economic constraints

Benefits: Healthy Profit via Healthy Food Retail

Retail food environments pose diet-related risks but offer health promotion opportunities. They serve as crucial interfaces between consumers and the food system. Interventions targeting retail environments have shown positive effects on consumer purchasing, dietary intake, and health outcomes. Public policy support can enhance intervention implementation and evaluation.

Retail spaces influence dietary behaviours and can address structural barriers to nutritional health. As part of this effort, stakeholders prioritize stocking healthier options, ensuring ample supply, maintaining fair pricing, and fostering healthy competition among suppliers.

Policy Recommendations for Supporting a Healthy Food Environment

Creating healthy food retail environments necessitates actions across all levels of the food system, including government policies, public-private partnerships, food production, food retail, and consumer behaviour. These collaborations are essential to ensure access to and consumption of nutritious foods, leading to improved public health outcomes.

Policy Recommendations for Adapting a Food System Approach to Develop a Healthy Food Retail Environment	
<p>Government</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of Stringent Standards for Healthier Food Production Allocate specific funding for programs/activities to empower consumers in making choices and inculcate healthy eating habits. Develop a national database for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of policies related to healthy food accessibility and affordability.
<p>Public-Private Partnerships</p>	<p>Strengthening Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster partnerships among government agencies, private sector stakeholders, and community organizations to implement joint initiatives aimed at improving access to affordable healthy foods. Collaborate with the private sector to expand affordable and healthy house brands by offering subsidies or tax incentives to prioritize healthier options. Implement an integrated supply and demand approach that combines price control strategies, consumer education, and collaboration with manufacturers.
<p>Food Production</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide tax incentives and subsidies for food manufacturers producing healthier alternatives. Establish a program for creating technical support, marketing research, collaboration with agencies and financial support for SMEs to produce healthier food products.
<p>Food Retail</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a certification program for food retailers adhering to standards for selling healthy foods, providing incentives for compliance. Implement zoning regulations within food retail outlets and restrict quotas for fast-food restaurants in targeted areas. Establish guidelines for designing and implementing a healthy eating environment in food retail settings.
<p>Consumer Choices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a nationwide comprehensive consumer empowerment program focusing social media communications on reading labels, understanding nutritional information, and making informed choices to promote healthier eating habits. Strengthen and expand community-led initiatives promoting healthy eating habits, such as community gardens and cooking workshops. Advocate for healthy lifestyles, particularly healthy eating and food choices, by integrating them into daily routines through collaborations with organizations. Implement assertive health campaigns, utilizing initiatives such as the Healthy Choice Logo. Integrate messaging on healthy eating with food waste reduction efforts to educate and increase consumer awareness.

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