Time for a “sugar tax” to help manage an epidemic

Can a “sugar tax” on sweetened foods – including those with high-fructose corn syrup – help reverse America’s escalating obesity epidemic? Some believe it can. So-called soda taxes have already been implemented in 33 states, including those with the highest rates of obesity – Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Oklahoma.

Using cigarette taxes as a model, we know that the relationship between smoking and cancer is linear. If you smoke, you increase your risk of lung cancer by 1,000 percent. Where implemented in the United States and around the world, high taxes on cigarettes resulted in twin declines in the number of cigarettes sold and in cancer rates. The same could hold true for a sugar tax and obesity rates.

Few medical trends in the United States are as alarming as our growing obesity rate. Over the past 20 years, the prevalence of obesity among adults has increased from 12 percent to 34 percent, and among children and adolescents, the rate has nearly tripled from 7 to 19 percent.

This growth parallels our nation’s increased consumption of sugar, much of it in the form of sweetened sodas, juices, sports drinks, flavored waters and ready-to-go teas and coffees. Research shows that sugary beverages are the only dietary element to be strongly linked to increased rates of obesity among children and adults.

Health care costs for treating obesity-related illnesses approach $149 billion per year, according to a report released by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Annual Medicare disbursements for diabetes and related illnesses top $80 billion.

Reversing such entrenched and expensive trends cannot be handled on an individual basis; it must be addressed by state and national policies designed to encourage changes in consumption patterns. We believe we should be petitioning for sugar taxes. Health policy experts have calculated that revenue from even a minimal penny-per-ounce national tax on sugary beverages alone could exceed $15 billion per year. Sugar tax revenues could be channeled into health promoting initiatives and obesity prevention programs in the neighborhoods that need them. If we teach our children the importance of being active and eating healthy, we could save billions in health care costs, and above all, we would be helping to ensure the future good health of our children.

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