Sugar tax needed, say US experts

Language Undefined



Read the original Nature article here. [1]

Sugar is as damaging and addictive as alcohol or tobacco and should be regulated, claim US health experts. According to a University of California team, new policies such as taxes are needed to control soaring consumption of sugar and sweeteners. Prof Robert Lustig argues in the journal Nature [2] for major shifts in public policy.

Industry body the Food and Drink Federation said "demonising" food was unhelpful. Several countries are imposing taxes on unhealthy food; Denmark and Hungary have a tax on saturated fat, while France has approved a tax on soft drinks.

Now, researchers in the US are proposing similar policies for added sugar and sweeteners, amid concern about the amount of sugar in the diet. The consumption of sugar has tripled worldwide over the past 50 years, with links to obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes.

In a comment in the journal Nature, Prof Lustig, a leading child obesity expert, says governments need to consider major shifts in policy, such as taxes, limiting sales of sweet food and drinks during school hours, or even stopping children from buying them below a certain age.

The professor of paediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco, told the BBC: "It [sugar] meets all the criteria for societal intervention that alcohol and tobacco meet." The researchers acknowledge that they face "an uphill political battle against a powerful sugar lobby".

But they write in Nature, that "with enough clamour for change, tectonic shifts in policy become possible".

"Take, for instance bans on smoking in public places and the use of designated drivers, not to mention airbags in cars and condom dispensers in public bathrooms.

"These simple measures - which have all been on the battleground of American politics - are now taken for granted as essential tools for our public health and well-being. It's time to turn our attention to sugar."

'Realistic approach'

Barbara Gallani, director of food safety and science at the UK Food and Drink Federation [3], said they recognised the worldwide health burden of non-infectious diseases and agreed action was needed.

"However, the causes of these diseases are multifactorial and demonising individual food components does not help consumers to build a realistic approach to their diet," she explained.

"The key to good health is a balanced and varied diet, in the context of a healthy lifestyle that includes plenty of physical activity."

Commenting on the Nature commentary, Dr Peter Scarborough of the British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group at the University of Oxford, said taxing certain food products was something policymakers should consider.

But he said taxing only one type of food could have unintended consequences, such as people cutting back on fruit and vegetables to save money for other purchases. He told the BBC: "If you only tax one aspect of food like sugar you can have unintended consequences.

"If you tax fat, salt and sugar, combined with subsidies for fruit and vegetables, you'll get healthier diets."

Source: BBC News [4]

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