

Westminster Hall Debate on an e-petition 106651 relating to a tax on sugary drinks

Royal College of Physicians' briefing

Introduction

This briefing has been produced by the Royal College of Physicians ahead of the Westminster Hall debate triggered by the e-petition 106651 relating to a tax on sugary drinks which takes place on Monday 30 November. It outlines some key statistics on the prevalence of obesity in the UK, its financial cost to the NHS and summarises the effectiveness of taxes on sugary drinks around the world. The RCP supports the introduction of a tax on sugar sweetened beverages to improve health and reduce levels of obesity and overweight conditions.

Summary

- A significant proportion of the UK is obese or overweight, which has significant health implications for individuals and places a financial burden on the NHS.
- Sugar sweetened drinks are a large contributing factor in obesity, particularly among children.
- Evidence suggests that price policies applied to food can influence what consumers buy and could contribute to improving health by shifting consumption in the desired direction and supporting healthier diets¹.

RCP position

- The RCP recommends exploring the use of taxes on unhealthy foods. This should start with sugary soft drinks, both as a lever to support behaviour change and as a means for raising revenue for health promotion. Legislative measures have worked in other countries (see below for examples).
- The RCP welcomes the latest evidence review by Public Health England, *Sugar Reduction: The evidence for action*. Its recommendations echo the RCP's call for evidence-based action on sugar, including a tax or levy on sugary drinks.

Key statistics on obesity and childhood obesity

- In England, around one in ten children in Reception class is obese (boys 9.9%, girls 9.0%)²
- Around one in five children in Year 6 is obese (boys 20.8%, girls 17.3%)
- Child obesity prevalence is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status and is highest in the most deprived Local Authorities in England.
- Around a quarter of both men (26 per cent) and women (24 per cent) are obese, and 41 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are overweight³.

¹ World Health Organisation. *Using price policies to promote healthier diets*. 2015

² Health and Social Care Information Centre. *National Child Measurement Programme 2013-14*.

- Based on current projections of the rising prevalence of obesity and overweight conditions, it is estimated that the cost to the NHS could increase from between £6 billion and £8 billion in 2015 to between £10 billion and £12 billion in 2030⁴.

Financial cost of obesity to the NHS

- Excess body weight costs the NHS £4.7 billion a year in treatments.
- Poor dental health costs the NHS £3.4bn per year respectively⁵.
- Dental decay is the most common form of hospital admission for children with 26,000 children, aged five to nine, admitted to hospital in England in 2013-14, up 14% from 2011⁶
- The NHS is now spending more on bariatric surgery than on the intensive lifestyle intervention programmes that were first shown to cut obesity and prevent diabetes over a decade ago⁷.
- The cost of treating diabetes to the NHS is £9.8bn, with £1bn for Type 1 and £8.8bn for Type 2 which is closely related to diet. Instances of diabetes are expected to increase in the coming years⁸.
- On current projections of rising prevalence of obesity and overweight conditions, the cost to the NHS could increase from between £6 billion and £8 billion in 2015 to between £10 billion and £12 billion in 2030.

Successful interventions in reducing instances of obesity

- Price policies applied to food can influence what consumers buy and could contribute to improving health by shifting consumption in the desired direction and supporting healthier diets⁹.
- A BMJ study found that a 20% tax on sugar sweetened beverages is predicted to reduce consumption of such drinks by 15% and lead to a reduction in the prevalence of obesity in the UK of 1.3% (around 180,000) people¹⁰.
- A tax on soft drinks was introduced in Mexico in January 2014, raising the price of these drinks by 10 per cent. Purchases of sugar sweetened beverages decreased by 12 per cent by the end of 2015¹¹.
- Following the introduction of a tax on all non-alcoholic beverages containing sweeteners in France in 2011, sugar-sweetened beverage sales fell by 3.3% between January and May 2012 following a 5% increase in prices¹².
- It should be noted that these interventions were introduced relatively recently, and the full impact of a tax on sugar sweetened beverages on reducing obesity in each of these examples is still to be assessed.

³ Health and Social Care Information Centre. Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England 2015

⁴ Overcoming obesity: an initial economic analysis. McKinsey Global Institute. 2014

⁵ Public Health England. *The Economic Burden of Obesity*. 2010

⁶ BBC News. [Child tooth removal 'at crisis point', doctors warn](#). 12 July 2015

⁷ Public Health England, adult and child obesity statistics, updated 2014

⁸ Diabetes UK. *The Cost of diabetes*. 2014

⁹ World Health Organisation. *Using price policies to promote healthier diets*. 2015

¹⁰ British Medical Association. Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people. 2015

¹¹ The Guardian. [Mexican soda tax cuts sales of sugary soft drinks by 6% in first year](#). 18 June 2015

¹² World Health Organisation. *Using price policies to promote healthier diets*. 2015

About the RCP

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) plays a leading role in the delivery of high quality patient care by setting standards of medical practice and promoting clinical excellence. We provide physicians in the United Kingdom and overseas with education, training and support throughout their careers. As an independent body representing almost 30,000 fellows and members worldwide, we advise and work with government, the public, patients and other professions to improve health and healthcare. Our primary interest is to build a health system that delivers high quality care for patients.

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