

WHO REPORT URGES TAX ON SUGAR-SWEETENED DRINKS

The 2016 World Health Organization (WHO) report on childhood obesity includes a recommendation to tax sugar-sweetened beverages. The report from the WHO's "Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity" also covers such areas as the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children and the implementing of school meal standards.

"Overall, the rationale for taxation measures to influence purchasing behaviours is strong and supported by the available evidence," the report stated. "Further evidence will become available as countries that implement taxes on unhealthy foods and/or sugar-sweetened beverages monitor their progress. The Commission believes there is sufficient rationale to warrant the introduction of an effective tax on sugar-sweetened beverages."

The report said price influences low-income consumers the most - "Fiscal policies may encourage this group of consumers to make healthier choices (provided healthier alternatives are made available) as well as providing an indirect educational and public health signal to the whole population."

The report went on to mention that some countries may consider taxes on food high in fat and sugar.

The WHO cited a study published in the British Medical Journal in January this year. The study found that a 10 % tax on sugar-sweetened beverages implemented since January 2014 in Mexico has been associated with an overall 12 % reduction in sales.

In response to this article, the Washington-based American Beverage Association said no evidence shows taxes on grocery items like beverages improve public health.

"Recent studies on the effect of a soda tax in Mexico show that it resulted in a reduction of 4.9 calories per day, an amount not even measurable on a bathroom scale," the association said. "Moreover, despite tax proponents' unfounded claims that soft drink consumption is the driving factor behind

CDE comments on sugar tax in SA

"The evidence in favour of taxing sugar containing beverages to reduce obesity is limited and based on statistical projections. Obesity imposes a significant economic burden on our already strained healthcare system and therefore cost effective interventions are required. The South African National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Obesity (2015) reports that taxation of unhealthy foods might be the most inexpensive and cost effective intervention to combat obesity. Therefore it seems reasonable to implement this as the first step towards combating obesity and type 2 diabetes in South Africa."

obesity, health data prove that the prevalence of public health challenges such as obesity continues to grow even though sugar consumption from beverages has dropped by 39 % since 2000."

Globally, at least 41 million children age 5 and under are overweight or obese, according to the WHO report. Overweight prevalence in that age group rose to 6.1 % in 2014 from 4.8 % in 1990. The number of overweight children in lower middle-income countries rose to 15.5 million in 2014 from 7.5 million in 1990.

The report, released 25 January, listed six areas that may help to end childhood obesity: intake of healthy foods; physical activity; preconception and pregnancy care; early childhood diet and physical activity; healthy nutrition and physical activity for school-age children and weight management.

"Overweight and obesity impact on a child's quality of life as they face a wide range of barriers, including physical, psychological and health consequences," said Sania Nishtar, PhD, co-chair of the commis-

sion. "We know that obesity can impact on educational attainment too, and this, combined with the likelihood that they will remain obese into adulthood, poses major health and economic consequences for them, their families and society as a whole."

The report recommended regulations on the marketing of foods and beverages to children to limit the consumption of items high in fat, sugar and salt by infants and young children. It also recommended establishing standards for school meals and eliminating the sale of unhealthy foods and drinks at schools.

The WHO report called for increased government action.

"The greatest obstacle to effective progress on reducing childhood obesity is a lack of political commitment and a failure of governments and other actors to take ownership, leadership and necessary actions," the report said. "Governments must invest in robust monitoring and accountability systems to track the prevalence of childhood obesity. These systems are vital in providing data for policy development and in offering evidence of the impact and effectiveness of interventions."

In developing the report, the WHO consulted with more than 100 WHO member states and reviewed nearly 180 on-line comments.

Reference:

World Health Organisation (2016) 'Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity' [Online]. Available at: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/204176/1/9789241510066_eng.pdf (Accessed: 16 February 2016).

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