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# Taxing Tater Tots Beats Subsidizing Salads

By: [Tom Jacobs](#) | February 9, 2010 | 15:27 PM (PDT) | [Print](#)

New research finds subsidizing healthy food is no answer to the obesity epidemic.

Although the idea has merit in an era of child obesity and rising health care costs, a tax on junk food would go over with the public like an asparagus-flavored Oreo. So some health care experts have [proposed](#) a politically palatable alternative: Rather than taxing fatty, sugary substances, why not subsidize food that's good for you? Wouldn't that have the same effect?

Newly published [research](#) finds the answer is, sadly, no.

Writing in the journal *Psychological Science*, researchers led by [Leonard Epstein](#) of the University of Buffalo describe a study of 42 mothers, all of whom had at least one child between 6 and 18 years old. Forty-five percent of the women, who were all from the Buffalo, N.Y., were clinically obese.

In a laboratory simulation, each woman was given \$22.50 per member of her family and asked to spend it on a week's worth of food. Initially, prices were based on current costs at local groceries: an average of \$2.26 for HCFN foods (which require consuming many calories to obtain nutrients) and \$2.03 for LCFN foods (which require consuming fewer calories to obtain nutrients).

The women then repeated the process four times, with variations. For two trials, prices of the healthier LCFN foods were lowered by 12.5 and 25 percent, respectively, while prices of the less healthy HCFN foods remained unchanged. For two additional trials, prices of the less healthy foods were raised, while those of the healthier foods remained the same. Researchers then determined how these fluctuations influenced what the women chose to buy.

"The analysis of micronutrients as a proportion of total calories purchased showed no significant change in the proportion of calories from carbohydrates, fats or protein when healthier foods were subsidized," the researchers report.

Essentially, when healthy food was a bargain, the women purchased more of it, but they also used part of their savings to buy more unhealthy food. The result, according to Epstein and his colleagues, was "no shift in the quality of the diet."

"These results suggest that a subsidy on healthy foods is unlikely to positively influence rates of obesity," the researchers conclude. They add that a tax on unhealthy food is much more promising, noting that in their study, a 10 percent increase in cost resulted in a 14.4 percent reduction in purchases of such items.

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So when it comes to healthy eating, it appears the stick is more effective than the carrot — even if the carrot is organic.

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