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Would junk food taxes really make people eat better?

Posted by **TIFFANY O'CALLAGHAN** Thursday, February 25, 2010 at 3:24 pm

5 Comments • Related Topics: Food, Nutrition, Obesity, body, prevention, junk food, obesity epidemic, sin tax, soda tax



© Image Source/Corbis

Public health officials grappling with the obesity epidemic have debated a wide range of approaches to helping slim the American waistline. To some degree, everything from **building more sidewalks** to **banning chocolate milk** has been explored. Yet few tactics have been as polarizing as the possibility of introducing tariffs on treats. Despite **endorsement** from several respected obesity researchers and **politicians**, soda taxes, for example, have been subject to severe **scrutiny**, as critics protested that implementing a tax before verifying that it would achieve the end result was shortsighted and potentially overreaching. So, in attempt to determine just how sin taxes might impact people's food choices, psychologists from the University of Buffalo decided to put junk food levies to the test—in the lab.

Researchers recruited shoppers to peruse the aisles of a mock supermarket filled with 68 common foods labeled with nutritional information. Participants were given a predetermined amount of cash, and were told to use that money to purchase a week's worth of groceries for a family. The first time, all of the products on the shelves were priced in keeping with local supermarkets. In subsequent trips, however, junk food was taxed—an additional 12.5%, then 25%—or healthier foods were subsidized to reduce cost.

The study, published in the journal *Psychological Science* revealed that taxes were more effective at getting people to avoid certain products than subsidies were at prompting healthier food purchases. In scenarios where junk foods were taxed, study participants generally came away with a lower caloric total for their groceries, and a higher ratio of protein to fats and carbohydrates. Yet, in situations where healthy foods were subsidized, the savings were often spent on additional junk food. That is, instead of stocking up on more fruits and vegetables because they were cheaper, the study's shoppers bought their veggies, and then used the leftover cash to bring home extra treats like chips and soda. In the end, the subsidies-only scenarios resulted in higher total calorie counts, and didn't result in overall nutritional improvement on the week's groceries.

Because the scenario is hypothetical, the findings certainly shouldn't be taken as the final word in the sin tax debate, the researchers stress, but should instead be used to inform the

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ongoing discussion about practical ways to battle obesity. To that end, they say, the next step should be research to determine whether these results would be replicated in the real world.

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1
 No, I think lowering prices for healthy and organic food is what will make people eat healthier. How can you expect people to eat healthy or at least choose to eat healthy when they can't afford to?
 miscklicked
 February 25, 2010
 at 5:16 pm
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2
 @miscklicked: did you even read the article?
 dotybj
 February 25, 2010
 at 6:24 pm
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3
 Finally! some common sense in food pricing! How about eliminating the junk food subsidies that make it so cheap compared to nourishing food? The tax on junk food could be used to subsidize health care, or subsidize organic food.
 leylas
 February 25, 2010
 at 8:30 pm
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4
 I believe a combination of lower healthy food prices and much higher prices for junk foods would be more effective in moving people in general toward healthier eating habits. If one doesn't vastly increase the price of junk foods while making healthy foods more affordable, it's natural that people will try to buy more of the unhealthy stuff.
 carpevis
 February 25, 2010
 at 10:43 pm
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5
 This is an interesting concept as tariffs have been one of the most effective tools in tobacco control. Although food can certainly be an addiction for some of us, it is somewhat different from tobacco, in that even "bad" foods may be enjoyed in moderation as part of a healthy diet. Thus, I'm not sure these types of tariffs make sense as public policy.

<http://www.reconstructingthirty.com>
 Chad

February 25, 2010
 at 10:49 pm
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"I will defend that nation of ours and their cause that is just and holy."

RADOVAN KARADZIC, former Bosnian-Serb leader, speaking during an opening defense statement at the U.N. war-crimes tribunal over his role in the killing of thousands of Muslims in Bosnia in the 1990s

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