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Tax the junk food: Not the answer, but part of the answer

By **DAN MOFFETT**

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I was standing in the checkout line at the neighborhood Winn-Dixie last week, watching a mother of no more than 18 or 19 unload her cart.

She had a toddler — a plump, round-faced girl — pulling on one end, and grandmother was pulling the front of the cart. This three-generation family portrait would have to be a horizontal. These were wide-bodied ladies, and even at this early age it was easy to see where the toddler was heading.

It would make a better story to tell you that the mother was putting bean sprouts, tofu and leafy lettuce onto the conveyor belt. But you know better, because I'm sure you've seen the scene, too. What came out of the cart was bags of Cheetos, chips, sodas, juice boxes that were 90 percent water and sugar, and some MoonPie-type pastry that I was unable to identify.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that about one-third of adults in this country and one of every five children are obese, and that a national epidemic of diabetes and other weight-related health problems is in our future. Reporting by The Post supports this theory.

Were I a braver man, I might have pointed the CDC numbers out to the ladies. But I feared for my safety.

As the country considers what to do about health care and how to promote healthier lifestyles, you will hear more about using sin taxes to steer people in the right direction. We know that sin taxes work. Health officials learned long ago that the most effective way to reduce smoking is to raise the price of cigarettes.

Sin taxes make no sense as a means of generating revenue because they price themselves to lower returns. As a means of forcing changes in behavior, however, sin taxes often work where other efforts fail.

Therapeutic taxation has its limits, though Americans aren't certain exactly where they are. New Jersey has considered sin taxes on fast-food restaurants to promote healthier eating. It's a fair case to make that obesity is a health threat that rivals cigarette smoking and drives up health care costs. But a special tax on Big Macs and Whoppers indiscriminately punishes all fast-food patrons, even healthy ones — and especially poor people.

Cigarettes warrant sin taxes because they can kill you even when used as directed. Fast food and alcohol in moderation pose a negligible health risk and can claim at least some nutritional value. Yet there seems little doubt that a properly applied tax can make populations healthier.

In Alaska, lawmakers raised the taxes on beer in 1983 and 2002. Researchers found that deaths from liver disease and chronic alcoholism declined between 11 percent and 29 percent after each tax hike. People just had less money to abuse themselves with.

Recent research indicates that sin taxes on junk food might lead people to more nutritious choices. A University of Buffalo study found that taxing high-fat and sugar-rich junk foods drove shoppers to lower-calorie foods. When a 10 percent tax was levied on junk foods, mothers switched to more nutritional choices and cut the calories they brought home by 6.5 percent.

Three years ago, a study in the United Kingdom concluded that by taxing junk food the government could prevent 3,200 deaths a year from heart attacks and strokes. A 2009 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that about three of four Americans would support such a tax, if the money were used to improve health care and fight obesity.

Nobody likes it when the government interferes unnecessarily with personal choice. But one thing the health reform debate has made clear is that, sooner or later, one way or another, we all end up paying for our neighbors' bad choices and bad health. Raising the price of Cheetos isn't a solution, but it may be one small part of the complex behavioral shift the nation needs.

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