

Will Adults Eat Less Pizza If Forced to Pay a Sin Tax?

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Body

Taxing soda and restaurant pizza could discourage U.S. adults from consuming those foods, ultimately helping them reduce long-term weight gain and insulin resistance, according to a 20-year longitudinal study.

The results bolster the argument that taxes on fast food and sweetened beverages could reduce obesity and improve overall health in the United States, the authors said. "National, state, or local policies to alter the price of less healthful foods and beverages may be one possible mechanism for steering U.S. adults toward a more healthful diet," the researchers concluded (Arch. Intern. Med. 2010;170:420-6).

The team pulled data from the CARDIA (***Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults***) study, which has tracked various factors reported by adults since 1985, including their diets and the prices they paid for foods. The new analysis focused on relationships between dietary changes and the prices reported by 5,115 participants at 0, 7, and 20 years.

The study found that a 10% increase in the price of soda (about 20 cents per 1-L bottle) resulted in a 3% decline in the probability of consuming soda. Pizza followed a similar trend. A \$1 increase in the price of both soda and pizza was associated with even greater changes in total intake, body weight, and HOMA insulin resistance scores.

As a result, the authors estimated, an 18% tax on soda and fast food could cut energy intake among young and middle-age adults by about 56 kcal per day. At the population level, this reduction could lead to about 5 fewer pounds in weight gain per person per year "and significant reductions in the risks of most obesity-related chronic diseases," the authors asserted.

In an editorial, Dr. Mitchell Katz, director of the San Francisco Department of Public Health, and Dr. Rajiv Bhatia, medical director of San Francisco's Division of Occupational and Environmental Health, said that taxes are a fair method to correct for the long-term health costs and other effects of unhealthy foods.

Disclosures: The diet study was conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and the University of Oslo, none of which reported any financial conflict of interest. Dr. Bhatia reported no conflict of interest, and Dr. Katz reported receiving expenses and consulting payments from the hospital management company Health Management Associates Inc.

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