



berkeley **media** studiesgroup

Frequently Asked Questions about Soda Taxes

Prepared by Berkeley Media Studies Group
for the California Center for Public Health Advocacy

April 2011

Is soda really the problem?

There are many causes of obesity. Why are you singling out one product?

Obesity indeed has many contributing factors. But if we are serious about tackling this epidemic, we have to start with the biggest culprits and where we can have some impact. That means soda and other sugar drinks because research shows they are the biggest contributor of empty calories in the American diet. In fact, 43 percent of the additional daily calories Americans consumed from 1977-2001 came from sugary drinks.

Isn't the real problem inactivity? Isn't it that Americans sit at desk jobs all day and on the couch all night?

Physical activity is important. But when Americans are drinking 50 gallons of sugary drinks a year — that's 39 pounds of sugar — they can't just walk it off. Drinking one 20-ounce Coke, which is marketed and sold as a single serving, has more sugar than six Krispy Kreme donuts.

Whose responsibility is it to reduce soda consumption?

Isn't personal responsibility the key to maintaining a healthy body weight?

Though people do have choices about what they drink, soda companies make that choice much harder. They have created an environment saturated with soda and aggressive marketing encouraging us—and our kids—to drink more sugar, more often and in more places than ever before. A soda tax is one way we can change that environment.

Isn't it parents' responsibility if kids drink too much soda?

When it comes to childhood obesity, parents certainly have a big role to play. But parents also face the biggest challenge, because sodas are available everywhere and the industry spends more than \$1 million every day marketing

their sugar water to kids. Parents don't stock the shelves in the corner store their kids visit on the way home from school. And parents can't monitor every website or text message soda companies send to their kid's phones. Soda companies must stop undermining parents with their aggressive marketing.

I've heard some places are trying to tax soda. Should government really be telling us what we should drink?

No one is telling anyone what to drink. But by adding a few pennies to the price of a soda, more people will choose differently. The result will be healthier children, families, and whole communities. One of the great things about democracy is that people have the power, through their elected representatives, to decide what kind of schools and communities they want for themselves and their children. Taxing soda is exactly the right thing for us to do.

Will a tax work?

How do you know a tax will work?

The purpose of a soda tax is to support important programs that we all know our children need to thrive like healthy school meals, physical education, parks and recreation programs, and safe drinking water. A tax, if it's high enough, might also lower consumption, and that would be fine, but it is not the purpose of the tax.

But both West Virginia and Arkansas already have excise taxes on beverages, yet they also have among the 10 highest rates of obesity in the nation.

Effective taxes do a lot more than cut the consumption of a harmful product. They also generate funds that cities and states can then put toward preventive programs and other efforts to create healthier communities. For example, in 1988, California passed Prop 99, putting a 25-cent tax on a pack of cigarettes. The money was used for a lot of things, including a media campaign and programs to help people stop smoking. Eleven years later, smoking rates have gone down faster than anywhere else in the country. And in 2008, just a year after New York nearly doubled its cigarette tax, calls to the state's smoker's quit line more than doubled. Unfortunately, the soda taxes in West Virginia and Arkansas don't use the funds for obesity prevention.

How will just a few pennies from a tax on soda make a dent in paying for improved healthcare or addressing obesity?

But it will. For example, in California, a 1 cent per ounce tax, or adding 12 cents on a can of soda, would raise more than \$1 billion every year for prevention programs. I'd call that a pretty good dent. To find out how much a soda tax can raise where you live, click [here](#).

This is just going to cause people to switch to diet soda. Isn't diet soda even worse for you than regular?

A lot of nutritionists aren't crazy about diet soda, and many diabetes experts are concerned that diet soda plays tricks on your insulin levels. What we know for sure is that sugar-sweetened beverages are directly linked to both obesity and diabetes, so that's where we are focusing our attention.

Is a tax fair?

Won't a tax take people's choices away?

Soda used to be considered a special treat. But it's not a "special treat" when Americans are consuming 50 gallons per person each year. The big beverage companies have succeeded in getting 40% of young kids to drink a soda or more a day. It's time we did something about the health consequences their products and their advertising tactics are having on us.

Isn't a soda tax just another in a long line of sin taxes?

This is really about the health of our kids. The beverage industry is spending half a billion dollars a year on marketing to convince our kids to buy soda. They hire top celebrities like as Lebron James, Beyonce and David Beckham. They sponsor popular TV shows like American Idol. They even bypass parents and text coupons directly to kids on their cell phones for discounts on sugary drinks. Parents don't stand a chance to keep their kids healthy if they have to fight soda companies' attempts to undermine them.

Isn't this just a regressive tax that will further hurt poor people trying to feed their families?

If soda companies were really concerned about the health of low-income people, they wouldn't market to them relentlessly. Research shows many residents in low income neighborhoods support a soda tax. In California low income residents support the tax by almost two to one.

If you're raising the price of a product consumed disproportionately by the poor, why not also tax fattening meals at fancy restaurants patronized by the rich?

If we're serious about addressing the obesity epidemic, we need to start with the biggest culprits and go where the science leads us, and that's right to sugary drinks. And we should put the money raised by the tax right back into the communities hurt the worst by this epidemic. Overall, this tax will help improve the communities where soda companies' practices have done the most damage.

If you're going to raise the price for poor people on the cheapest beverage, are you going to lower the price of something else?

Actually, the cheapest beverage of all is tap water. Funds from a soda tax could make sure that kids in every school have clean water to drink. Right now, in far too many schools, they don't and there's no money to fix the broken water fountains.

Most soda drinkers are not overweight. If this is really about health, then why should normal-weight people have to pay too?

Healthy people may drink an occasional soda, and probably will continue, even for a few pennies more. A tobacco tax is paid for by all smokers, not just those with lung cancer. In the same way, it's only fair that all soda drinkers pay a soda tax.

Won't the tax hurt small businesses, killing jobs and causing a lot of hard-working people to become unemployed?

Bottled water and diet soda— the alternatives for people who want to buy something else — are all made by the same companies, brought by the same truck drivers and sold in the same stores that dispense regular soda, so no, this will not cost any jobs. Big tobacco said the same thing when communities asked to remove smoking from restaurants and bars. Boy were they wrong! Research has shown that business went up in places where people were free of second-hand smoke. Similarly, we're confident communities will thrive in environments that offer healthier food and drink alternatives.

Isn't this tax really just another form of social engineering?

The social engineering happening right now is being done by the soda industry. Companies sell sugar-loaded drinks at artificially low prices and then pour billions into marketing to get people to drink more and more. This tax would help correct that, not simply by helping people reconsider soda purchases, but by raising money to change the environments where we live, work and attend school in ways that promote good health instead of working against it. This means paying for things like healthy school food and safe drinking water.

Won't this lead to taxes on other things, like cheeseburgers or chips? Where does it stop?

Soda is different because our bodies don't recognize liquid calories the same way they do calories from solid foods, making it easier to have a second or third refill on a soda than to have a second or third candy bar, even though a 20-ounce soda has about the same calories as a serving of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and more than three times the sugar. The bottom line is that if we really want to

reverse rates of obesity, we have to confront the biggest contributor: soda and other sugary drinks.

Why can't soda companies just regulate themselves?

Isn't the soda industry doing enough already? Haven't companies like Coca-Cola started doing things to help consumers, like putting calorie information on the front of their containers, or offering cans in smaller portions?

Soda companies can do better. But if they don't make more significant improvements, that's where public policy comes in. As citizens, we can ask our elected representatives to limit the harmful actions of corporations. That's what our democracy is all about.

What about all the good work soda companies are doing? After all, they took soda out of schools.

It took 10 years for the soda companies to agree to take soda out of schools across the country. They did so only after fighting tooth and nail to keep states from banning soda sales in schools. It wasn't until after they lost, time and again, state by state, that they agreed to the federal change and then sought credit for doing something that was going to happen anyway.

Doesn't Coca-Cola already have a voluntary agreement not to market to children under 12?

It's all smoke and mirrors. Coca-Cola won't advertise on a TV program that has a large percentage of its audience under 12, including cartoons like SpongeBob SquarePants. But Coke has no problem marketing on American Idol, which has millions of kids under 12 tuning in, far more than ever watch SpongeBob.

Don't soda companies pay for anti-obesity campaigns, like physical education programs? Isn't that enough to offset any negative impact?

None of that substitutes for selling so much soda. The bottom line is that the beverage industry spends billions marketing to kids and to the communities with the highest risks of obesity and diabetes—the very social costs that soda companies fuel and then don't have to pay for. The goal of a tax isn't just to offset the negative impact of soda; it's to prevent it in the first place.