FOOD POLICY

The taxing issue of sugar-sweetened beverages*Circulation* <https://doi.org/d2sr> (2020)

Taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB), including soft drinks, sodas, juice drinks and sports drinks, has been implemented in many countries to curb their consumption, encourage their reformulation and lessen the burden of disease associated with their consumption. Policies include taxation per volume of product (implemented in Mexico, Belgium and the Philippines, for example), taxation per tier of sugar content (Chile, United Kingdom and Spain, for example) and taxation per absolute content of sugar (Sri Lanka, Mauritius and South Africa, for example). Yujin Lee, from Tufts University, and colleagues have modelled the health and economic impacts of these SSB tax designs for the United States.

The CVD-PREDICT model was used to simulate and quantify the effects of the SSB tax designs on cardiovascular (CV) events and incidence of type 2 diabetes (T2DM) — the model incorporates annual probability of each individual's transition towards cardiometabolic disease. Baseline data on diet, lifestyle, sociodemographic characteristics and cardiometabolic risk were from recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey cycles. SSB tax revenues, implementation costs (both political and industrial) and healthcare costs (both formal and informal) were modelled over 10 years and a lifetime (a mean of 28.7 years), and the base-case scenario included modest ongoing voluntary industry reformulation.

Over a lifetime, the volume tax would prevent 850,000 CV events and 269,000 cases of T2DM; the tiered tax approach would prevent 1,673,000 CV events and 531,000 cases of T2DM; and the absolute sugar content tax would prevent 1,852,000 CV events and 550,000 cases of T2DM. The three tax designs would produce US\$1.6 billion in policy implementation costs. The volume, tiered and absolute sugar content taxes would generate US\$80.4 billion, US\$142 billion and US\$41.7 billion in government tax revenue; and cost the industry US\$0.29 billion, US\$0.72 billion and US\$1.44 billion in terms of reformulation, respectively. All approaches made healthcare savings, of US\$53.2 billion for the volume tax and US\$105 billion for both the tiered system and the absolute sugar content tax. Health gains were greatest among younger adults, Black and Hispanic people and lower-income Americans.

SSB taxation is contentious. It is a political tool that challenges both the consumer and food industry to negotiate taste, pleasure, self-determination and behaviour change for health. This interesting study puts hard numbers on the impact of SSB tax options on cardiometabolic disease burden in the United States.

Anne Mullen

Published online: 16 July 2020
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-020-0123-9>