

Major medical groups call for soda taxes

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(HealthDay)—Two medical groups have declared war on sodas and energy drinks by calling for taxes on what has become the leading source of sugar in the diets of children and teens.

In a new joint policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Heart Association (AHA) also recommended a host of other public policies, all aimed at cutting consumption of the unhealthy drinks.

This is the first time the AAP has advocated for such a tax.

"Sugary drinks make up more than half the [sugar](#) intake in kids' diets and have no redeeming nutritional value. They are basically [sugar water](#)," said pediatrician Dr. Natalie Muth, lead author of the policy statement.

Excess sugar in kids' diets has contributed to an epidemic of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes, said Avigdor Arad, director of the Mount Sinai PhysioLab, in New York City.

It also increases the risk for tooth decay, heart disease, fatty liver disease and death among children and teens, according to the statement.

"The average kid is getting about 30 pounds of sugar from sugary drinks per year, which is enough to fill a small bathtub," said Muth, a California pediatrician and communications chair of the AAP Section on Obesity. "We're not talking about a small problem here, or a small amount of intake from drinks. It's a huge amount."

Evidence has shown that added taxes would cut down consumption of a product, Muth said, pointing out how well taxes on tobacco and alcohol have worked to curb consumption.

Additionally, some locales in the United States and elsewhere already have implemented taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks, and saw consumption decline dramatically.

Berkeley, Calif., introduced the nation's first soda tax in 2014 and,

within months, purchases of the sugary drinks declined by 21 percent, according to a February report in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Three years later, 52 percent fewer sugar-laden beverages were sold and water [drinking](#) rose by 29 percent.

"With the evidence mounting that some policy measures can be quite effective at reducing [sugar intake](#), we felt it was time to have a message and a policy out there really advocating for these measures," Muth said.

The AAP/AHA policy statement recommends that:

- Local, state and national officials consider raising the price of sugary drinks, either through excise taxes or by other means.
- Federal and state governments support efforts to block marketing of sugary drinks to kids and teens.
- Children's menus and vending machines offer water, milk and other healthy beverages by default.
- Federal nutrition assistance programs focus on access to [healthy food](#) and beverages, and discourage sugary drinks.
- Access be improved to nutrition information on labels, restaurant menus and advertisements.
- Hospitals serve as a role model by establishing policies to limit or discourage purchase of sugary drinks.

Arad agreed that taxes on sodas and sugar-sweetened beverages stand a good chance of working.

"It worked with tobacco years ago," Arad said. "I think we are going in the right direction."

The medical groups focused on sugary drinks because it's proven harder to study the health effects of added sugar in food products, Muth said.

"Food tends to have other nutrients," Muth said. "The evidence is not as tight about the impact on overall health as it is on [sugary drinks](#). The evidence was stronger and the problem more dire with drinks, with what we have to work with at this point."

In general, consumers don't seem to think of drinks as a source of calories, Arad said.

"People don't think about the drinks as food," he added. "They consume it quickly and in large quantities."

Americans are recommended to get no more than 3 teaspoons of added sugar per day, Arad said.

But the average can of sugar-sweetened soda contains between 7 to 10 teaspoons of sugar, according to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Sports drinks can have between 7 to 12 teaspoons of sugar, fruit punches between 8 to 14 teaspoons, and iced teas as many as 8 teaspoons.

"The body is not really meant to handle such quantities of pure sugar," Arad said.

The AAP and AHA noted that soda taxes have successfully reduced consumption in Berkeley and Philadelphia, and the added revenue used in locales like San Francisco and Seattle to fund preventive health services, programs to help low-income people buy healthy foods, and school subsidies to increase servings of fruits and vegetables.

The policy statement was published online March 25 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

More information: The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

has more about [sugary drinks](#).

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