

'Fat' tax on food could prevent 3,000 heart attack and stroke deaths every year

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Taxing certain foodstuffs in the UK could prevent up to 3200 deaths from heart attacks and stroke every year, suggests a study in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health.

Value Added Tax (VAT), charged at 17.5%, is already applied to confectionery, ice cream, savoury snacks, and most drinks.

The authors assessed economic data on food consumption in the UK and applied a mathematical formula to calculate the likely impact of price rises on demand of a range of complementary foodstuffs.

They used three different approaches.

They first applied the tax to dairy products containing high levels of saturated fats, such as whole butter and cheese, baked goods, puddings.

In the second approach, they applied the tax to foods attracting an SSCg3d score of more than 9. This is a validated measure of the “healthiness” of a food. For example, spinach scores -12, while chocolate digestive biscuits score +29.

In the third approach they widened the range of foodstuffs taxed to cut fat, salt, and sugar intake for maximum health.

The calculations showed that applying VAT to foodstuffs high in saturated fats would increase salt intake instead, and could actually

increase deaths from heart disease and stroke. It would also increase weekly household food expenditure by 3.2%.

Taxing foods attracting a high SSCg3d score would prevent around 2300 deaths a year and add 4% to weekly food bills

Widening the range of foodstuffs for maximum health would boost weekly household food expenditure by 4.6% or £0.67 a person a week.

But it would prevent up to 3200 deaths from heart disease and stroke every year, equivalent to a drop of 1.7% across the nation.

The authors conclude that food taxes would change dietary habits and cut deaths from cardiovascular disease, but would need to be carefully targeted to prevent unhealthy compensatory behaviour in food choices.

Source: BMJ Specialty Journals

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