

Obesity study shows fat tax is not the answer

November 16 2011

(Medical Xpress) -- New research from the University of Reading suggests that a 'fat tax' might not be the best way to tackle Britain's obesity problems.

The researchers say increasing the costs of fatty foods will not change the eating habits of people with bad diets but will have a detrimental effect on those with lower incomes.

Instead, they suggest, there should be public health campaigns that focus on the underlying reasons for poor dietary choices as opposed to making a marginal change in the diets of all.

The UK government is keeping international evidence on a [fat tax](#) under review, including a similar policy already in place in Denmark, which imposes a surcharge on foods with more than 2.3 per cent [saturated fat](#).

The study, led by Richard Tiffin, Professor of Applied Economics in the Department of Agriculture, looked at the inequalities which arise through people's dietary choices. Recent research warns that almost half of adult men could be obese by 2030, jumping from the current level of 26% to between 41% and 48%. The proportion of obese women is predicted to rise from 26% to between 35% and 43%.

Professor Tiffin argues that inequalities in nutritional and economic status translate into inequalities in obesity. In general, individuals on low incomes are less likely to consume wholemeal bread and vegetables, but are more likely to consume fat spreads and oils, non-diet soft drinks,

pizza, processed meats, and table sugar. Older children (aged 11-18) appear to have worse diets than younger children (aged 2-10) or adults as they consume less fruit and eat more calorie-dense foods such as burgers, kebabs, meat pies, pastries, and chips.

The study investigated a policy proposing an increase in the price of fatty foods by 1% for every percent of saturated fats they contain; for instance, milk which contains 1.72% of saturated fats would see its price increase by 1.72%. To offset this tax burden and to encourage consumption of fruit and vegetables, a subsidy on these foods would be introduced to exactly cancel the costs of the fat tax paid by consumers.

Professor Tiffin said: "The change in diet that results is marginal and the worst diets remain almost unchanged. Furthermore, a tax on saturated fats would have a proportionately larger impact on the poorer segments of society which would worsen as the tax becomes increasingly targeted on the specific elements of the diet which are unhealthy.

"A fiscally-based intervention to address poor diets will contribute to a worsening of economic inequality and does little to address health inequality. Dietary inequality should be seen as a component of the problem of overall health inequality and the latter should be the primary focus of public health policy. Identifying people prone to adopt unhealthy patterns of behaviour is likely to be more successful in tackling those inequalities. Interventions should focus attention on the reasons why choices are bad as opposed to merely effecting a marginal improvement across all diets."

Provided by University of Reading

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