

South Africans sweet on sugary drinks despite fat tax

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South Africa plans a new "fat tax" on sugary drinks to combat an obesity epidemic—but sweet-toothed consumers say its chances are slim of making them cut down.

Ranked as one of the most obese nations on the continent, South Africa is joining a growing list of countries around the world, such as Britain and Mexico, trying to put a cap on fizzy drinks.

But even health experts, who welcome the proposed levy, don't believe the tax will single-handedly discourage South Africans from popping open bottles of [sugar](#)-packed soda and sweetened juices.

The levy, announced by Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan in his budget in February, will come into effect in April next year.

It is aimed not only at saving people from their own unhealthy appetites but at offsetting the economic costs of diseases related to [obesity](#).

In Zandspruit, a township west of Johannesburg, 30-year-old insurance broker Thulani Masango scoffs at the levy.

"We know sugar causes diabetes and obesity, but... we cannot survive without sugar," said Masango, as he strolled down a dusty street.

"As we speak, the price of meat has gone up, but we continue braaing (barbecuing). Alcohol goes up almost every year, we still drink.

"It's the same with sugar. It's something that is uncontrollable," said Masango.

A Zandspruit supermarket supervisor and mother of two, Anastacia Tshabalala, 53, agrees. She believes that sugar is addictive.

"Sugar is sugar! We are going to take it no matter what. Even if the price goes up, we have to take sugar everyday—you can't live without it," she said.

South African endocrinologist Professor Tess van der Merwe, who says half of adult women and a third of adult men in South Africa are "overweight", is also sceptical.

"These are epidemic proportions," she said, adding that about 15 percent of South Africans are in the "morbidly obese category"—more than 100 pounds or 45 kilogrammes overweight.

"I don't believe that it will curb the epidemic unless we have a definitive preventative and treatment strategy in place—like tax didn't curb alcohol use," she said.

'Everybody needs sugar'

Obesity rates are rising sharply among African children.

A World Health Organization-commissioned study released in January showed that childhood obesity has become an "exploding nightmare" in the developing world, including Africa.

The number of overweight or obese children under five nearly doubled from 1990 to 2014, from 5.4 million to 10.3 million.

The WHO declared obesity a disease 10 years ago, but people still struggle to accept it as a deadly disease.

"People need to realise that there are more people dying from obesity (related illnesses) than from any other disease in the world," said van der Merwe.

Minister Gordhan has yet to reveal the proposed taxation rates, but a Plos-One study published in 2014 projects that a 20 percent tax on [sugary drinks](#) will reduce obesity in South Africa by between 2.4 and 3.8 percent for females and males respectively.

Manufacturers of sugar-sweetened drinks in South Africa believe the tax could lead to job losses.

"For the treasury to announce a tax on only one category of foods is discriminatory," said Mapule Ncanywa, executive director of the Beverage Association of South Africa.

"We don't think that it's going to have the desired result of reducing excessive intake of sugar, let alone obesity for that matter."

Security guard Thomas Sithole, who relies on caffeine- and sugar-laden energy drinks to make it through his night shifts, worries that the tax may be disastrous for him.

"There are things they can [tax](#), but not sugar... everybody needs sugar," said Sithole, seated outside a local soft-drink shop after his night's work.

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