

The fight against obesity: To tax or not to tax?

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Obesity is a global public health epidemic with increasing prevalence that cost the UK £25 billion in 2015. Fighting and preventing obesity has become a major health priority in the UK and worldwide, and food

taxation has been suggested as a crucial measure in order to achieve this. The debate 'This house believes that the UK population trend in obesity cannot be reversed without food taxation' will be held at the SfE BES 2017, the annual conference of the Society for Endocrinology, in Harrogate. The debate explores whether food taxation is an indispensable strategy to correct obesity trends, or whether there should be other ways of approaching the problem.

Over the last two decades the prevalence of [obesity](#) in the UK has almost doubled, with 80% more cases in 2016 than in 1993. Men and women are 41% and 31% more overweight, respectively, compared to 1993. Obesity deteriorates quality of life in various ways - it has an impact on the development and worsening of other conditions, such as type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and can have distressing social implications, including discrimination and unemployment.

Food taxes placed upon food or drinks that are considered unhealthy for being fattening or sugary have been suggested as a way to promote healthier diets and to reduce the economic impact of obesity.

Professor Roy Taylor, Professor of Medicine and Metabolism at the University of Newcastle and Honorary Consultant Physician, believes that taxing unhealthy foods is crucial to solving the [obesity problem](#). Food taxes can be used to help prevent the disease by bringing awareness to the negative personal costs involved in consuming certain foods, and by helping consumers identify and avoid products that contribute to obesity but may not be obviously unhealthy, such as processed foods with high sugar content. Furthermore, this tax could be an incentive for food manufacturing companies to create and promote healthier options.

Prof Taylor states, "Food [taxation](#) has been shown to change consumer shopping habits, which in turn could shift the focus of food manufacturers to produce healthier products. The major goal is a

decrease in daily calorie consumption."

He further comments, "The important role of measures to help limit quantity of food consumed is beginning to be recognised and acted upon. For instance, the recent proposal to limit calorie content of snacks sold in NHS hospitals is one small step along a major highway."

However, Dr Tahrani, NIHR Clinician Scientist and Honorary Consultant Endocrinologist at the University of Birmingham, disagrees and believes that focusing on food taxation is too simplistic and overlooks the many facets that influence the development of the obesity.

He states, "Genetic and environmental interactions play an important role in obesity. One of the main factors that influence the development of obesity is the balance between energy intake and energy expenditure but this balance is influenced by multiple and complex factors that also interact with one another, including genetic predisposition, individual psychology, societal influences and lifestyle."

Food taxation initiatives in other countries have not yet yielded any meaningful results and there is also ambiguity in the definition of food tax. It is not clear what foods would qualify for taxation, or what impact this would have on the poorer in society. Consumers and healthcare providers need education the causes and treatments of obesity.

Dr Tahrani comments, "Although taxation may have a beneficial effect, targeting just this one aspect will not be the solution. We need to learn more about the impact of [food](#) taxation on the behaviour of patients with obesity, and further research to provide evidence for such interventions in the fight against obesity."

Provided by Society for Endocrinology

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