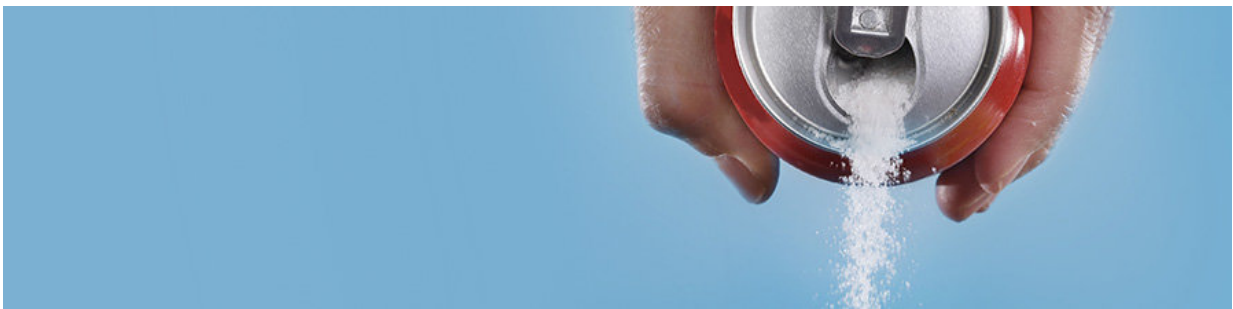


Producers of sugary food have more incentives to maintain sugar levels than cut them, study finds

December 5 2017, by Ed Grover



Credit: City University London

A [new study](#) from the World Health Organisation and City, University of London has found that producers of food with high sugar content have many more incentives to maintain sugar levels than cut them.

Professor Corinna Hawkes, who led the research, concluded that governments and consumers must take action to make sugary products less appealing to food manufacturers.

"This unique study shows that the incentives food manufacturers have to add sugars to their food products far outweigh the disincentives," said Professor Hawkes, Director of the Centre for Food Policy at City.

"Governments and consumers can act to rebalance these incentives so the sugar supply system becomes more aligned with recommendations to reduce how much sugar we eat."

Excess sugar in food

The World Health Organisation (WHO) produced the report in response to the growing issue of consumption of excess sugars throughout the WHO European region. Consuming excess "free sugars" (added sugar, and that in honey, syrup and fruit juice) is associated with weight gain for adults and children.

The study investigated why manufacturers and other supply chain actors use sugar in foods and why they use it in such large amounts. It concluded that a comprehensive approach encompassing the entire food system is necessary in order to reduce sugar intake.

According to WHO recommendations, intake of free sugars should be less than 10 per cent of total daily energy intake for both adults and children, and ideally should be less than 5 per cent.

Professor Hawkes added: "Most of us like sweet foods, but the data shows we eat too much sugar. To reduce how much sugar we eat, it's crucial for governments and parents to take action to protect very young children from so much exposure to sugary foods.

"This will help children develop a taste for a wide range of foods and so create future demand for foods with less sugar. Industry must stop exposing young kids to such sugary foods in the first place."

The study

The primary source of data was information gained from 34 interviews. These were with informants with experience and expertise across the sugar supply chain.

They included eight interviews with people involved in [sugar production](#), trade and processing; 15 interviews with those involved in manufacture of food and drink; nine interviews with informants involved in retail; and two with academic experts.

Professor Hawkes and her team also conducted an analysis of the supply chain and reviewed relevant literature to inform, complement and validate the interviews.

Incentives for high sugar content

The new report reveals that producers and retailers of food with high sugar content currently have many more incentives to continue using sugar than to limit its use or substitute it completely.

These incentives include:

- the perception that sugar is the gold standard for sweetness;
- sugar's availability as a relatively cheap and abundant ingredient from multiple sources;
- manufacturers' and retailers' focus on maintaining competitiveness;
- manufacturers' and retailers' desire to maintain "choice" for consumers who still want to buy [sugary foods](#);
- sugar's provision of essential functional qualities for manufactured foods; and
- consumer concern about the use of artificial sweeteners.

Currently, there are relatively few incentives for producers to reduce

sugar in manufactured food. These include:

- growing consumer awareness of the health effects of sugar;
- government policies and actions to reduce consumer demand for sugar; and
- availability of a greater range of non-caloric sweeteners.

Recommendations for new policy tools

The report explores a wide range of policy tools that governments can use to create healthier food environments by shifting the incentive structure for manufacturers and retailers towards reducing sugar in foods, and by helping people to develop healthy dietary preferences.

The tools are consistent with the policy options set out in the WHO European Food and Nutrition Action Plan 2015–2020.

In particular, the report considers the following approaches to improving the nutritional quality of diets:

- restrictions on the marketing of foods to children;
- consumer-friendly labelling;
- pricing policies;
- school food standards; and
- ambitious strategies to reformulate the composition of food.

How will the study contribute to change?

Professor Hawkes' study will contribute to the ongoing implementation of the WHO guidelines on free [sugar intake](#). It also provides a strong case for further research and policy discussions on the most effective ways to transform modern [food](#) systems for health.

Professor Hawkes presented the analysis to WHO member states for consultation at the joint Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)/WHO International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition, held in Budapest, Hungary, on 4th and 5th December 2017.

Commenting on the study, Dr João Breda, Head of the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, said: "It is evident that, from a health perspective, decisive action is needed to bring down the levels of [sugar](#) in manufactured foods in Europe."

Provided by City University London

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