

Sugary drinks tax is working: Now it's time to target snacks

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A sugar tax on soft drinks has now been in operation in the UK for more than a year and [results so far](#) seem to indicate it's working. But campaigners say more still needs to be done and that the next target should be [biscuits, cakes and snacks](#) -- many of which contain high amounts of sugar.

Such taxes have been implemented [in 28 countries and 12 cities as of 2019](#). Initial results suggest such taxes have the [potential to reduce consumption of sugar](#) and so may help to reduce [obesity, diabetes and dental decay](#) in the future.

The number of people living with obesity has almost [tripled over the past 40 years](#)—and continues to rise. Obesity is increasing most rapidly in [low and middle income communities](#). And this is leading to a [dual burden of malnutrition and obesity](#), when a population has both too much food and not enough of the right foods.

Excess [sugar](#) consumption has been linked with increases in obesity and, as a result, the World Health Organisation recommends that people should consume less sugar. Sugary drinks, such as carbonated [soft drinks](#), sports drinks and [energy drinks](#), are one of the major sources of dietary sugar, especially for children and adolescents. So they have become a key target for sugar reduction—but more still needs to be done.

The UK picture

In 2018, the UK became one of the latest countries to implement a tax on sugary drinks. But unlike most other taxes that [simply increase the price of products](#), the [UK Soft Drink Industry Levy](#) works by encouraging soft drink manufacturers to reformulate and reduce the sugar content of their products. This means that consumers do not have to change their purchase habits to benefit from reduced sugar consumption.

These taxes can also make revenue that can be used to fund public health programs such as physical activity in schools or tooth brushing interventions.

A recently published [Public Health England report](#) highlighted how the

UK levy has indeed resulted in reductions in the sugar content of sugary drinks—a 29% reduction per 100ml in retailer own-brand and manufacturer-branded products. And it has also pushed consumers towards low or zero sugar products.

But, that said, the sugar content of non-taxed drinks such as [milkshakes](#) and non-taxed sweet snacks such as biscuits and cakes [remains high](#). Indeed, a team of researchers at Queen Mary University of London found that [97% of cakes and 74% of biscuits](#) contain unnecessary amounts of sugar. This means that the consumption of sugar (at least in England) [is still a major problem](#).

This is despite [voluntary sugar reduction initiatives](#) that were implemented to encourage manufacturers of sweet drinks and snack products to reduce sugar content by 20% by 2020. These initiatives have resulted in [a reduction of sugar in some products](#) (showing that it is possible) but almost no change in others, highlighting the limitations of voluntary industry self regulation.

Snack taxes

Sugary drink taxes have the potential to reduce sugar consumption. And in the longer term, especially if combined with "snack taxes," may also help to reduce obesity and diabetes—as supported by [a recent study published in the *British Medical Journal*](#). But there are a [number of barriers](#) to the implementation of more sugary drink and snack taxes globally.

Opposition from the well resourced and [powerful food and drink sector](#), and associated lobbyists, is a critical barrier. Their arguments against taxation include:

- Obesity is a condition of individual responsibility, so education

and increased [physical activity](#) should be encouraged rather than taxation.

- Taxation is "regressive" meaning that it affects lower socioeconomic groups more than those in higher socioeconomic groups.
- Taxes can result in profit and job losses, negatively impacting the economy.

These arguments, which are targeted both at the government and the public, are similar to those used by the [tobacco industry against tobacco taxation](#). And these arguments are pushed directly at meetings with policy makers and indirectly via the media.

Industry groups also argue against taxation [and have influenced food policy globally](#), for example by funding and conducting research used to support or oppose health policies, or by becoming members of nutrition research panels that advise [policy makers](#).

Reducing obesity

But on top of taxes, [governments do have other options](#). Actions such as better labeling and the restriction of junk food advertising can make a difference. But it is not just governments who should be responsible for reducing sugar consumption. [Everyone has a role to play](#), including the private sector and wider society.

Retailers, for example, could reduce the promotion of high sugar products in favor of healthier alternatives. And schools or community centers could increase the provision of quality nutrition education. Ultimately, this is a societal problem and so it needs a [societal solution](#).

And while taxing sugar and [sugary drinks](#) is not going to prevent obesity, diabetes and dental decay overnight, these taxes do have the potential to

reduce the sugar content of products on the shelves. They can also help to generate revenue and spark conversations that may lead to changes in social norms around sugar, changes that can make a big difference to the health and wellbeing of millions of people.

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