

Sugar purchased in soft drinks fell 10% following introduction of industry levy

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The amount of sugar purchased by households through soft drinks fell by 10% in the year following the introduction of the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy, say researchers at the University of Cambridge.

While the volume of [soft drinks](#) purchased did not change, the amount of sugar in those drinks was 30g lower per household per week, which the researchers say represents a 'win-win' for [public health](#) and industry.

Sugary drinks have been linked to a number of health issues, including dental caries, obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. In April 2018, the UK introduced a Soft Drinks Industry Levy explicitly designed to incentivise manufacturers to reduce the [sugar content](#) of soft drinks. The levy was placed on manufacturers, importers and bottlers rather than on consumers. It included two levy tiers: 24p per litre for 'high tier' drinks containing more than or equal to 8g total sugar per 100ml; and 18p per litre for 'low tier' drinks containing more than or equal to 5g and less than 8g total sugar per 100ml.

A team led by researchers from Cambridge's Centre for Diet and Activity Research (CEDAR) at the MRC Epidemiology Unit analysed data from the Kantar Worldpanel, in which participating households are asked to record all food and drink purchases brought into the home. This included approximately 31 million purchases of drinks, confectionery and toiletries from March 2014 to March 2019.

The team divided soft drinks into three categories based on sugar content: high tier drinks, low tier drinks and no levy drinks (those with less than 5g total sugar per 100ml). As the Soft Drinks Industry Levy may have led households to substitute other drinks, they also examined purchasing of drinks exempt from the levy, including milk-based drinks, alcoholic drinks and no-added-sugar fruit juices.

The researchers compared purchases in March 2019 against a 'counterfactual' estimate—that is, an estimate based on pre-existing trends of how the purchases would look had the levy not taken place at all. This is the first analysis of the impact of the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy on drink purchases that takes pre-existing trends into

account. The results of the study, funded by the NIHR, are published today in *The BMJ*.

Prior to the introduction of the levy, the volume of high-tier drinks and amount of sugar associated was on a downward trend. However, even taking this trend into consideration, by March 2019, the volume of high tier drinks purchased had fallen by 155ml (44%) per household per week compared to the counterfactual estimate. The amount of sugar purchased in these drinks reduced by 18.0g per household per week, a 46% decrease.

For low tier drinks, the volume of drinks purchased was 177ml (86%) lower per household per week in March 2019 compared with the counterfactual estimate. The amount of sugar fell by 12.5g (an 86% decrease).

Although the volume of no levy drinks purchased didn't change, as these soft drinks are not sugar-free and some increased in their sugar content, this meant that the sugar purchased from these drinks increased by 15.3g, equivalent to a 166% increase.

Overall, compared to the counterfactual estimate, there was no change in the volume of all soft drinks purchased in March 2019. However, there was a reduction in sugar purchased in all soft drinks (including exempt drinks) combined of 29.5g per household per week, equivalent to a 10% decrease.

The introduction of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy also coincided with significant decreases in purchasing of bottled water. However, the team say this reduction may be due to increases in concern about single-use plastic, which have been attributed, in the UK, to the broadcast of the BBC's nature documentary series *Blue Planet 2*.

Dr. David Pell from CEDAR, the study's first author, said: "A 10% drop in the amount of sugar purchased from soft drinks might sound modest, but we know there's an association between the amount of sugar drinks we consume and the risk of developing conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Cutting out even a relatively small amount of sugar should have important impacts on the number of people with obesity and diabetes."

Professor Martin White, also from the CEDAR, and the project lead, added: "The Soft Drinks Industry Levy appears to have led to a reduction in the amount of sugar that people are purchasing in soft drinks without impacting on the overall volume of soft drinks sold. It's likely that this is due to manufacturers reformulating their products and reducing the sugar concentration in their drinks, as well as to consumers switching to lower [sugar](#) alternatives."

"This represents a valuable win-win for public health and the food industry—potentially improving people's health with no detrimental effect on the volume of soft drinks that companies are selling."

More information: Pell, D et al. Changes in British household purchases of soft drinks associated with implementation of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy: a controlled interrupted time series analysis. *BMJ*; 11 Mar 2021; [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.n254](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n254)

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