Americans don't want soda tax, size restrictions

March 20 2014, by Stacey Shackford

(Medical Xpress)—Those hoping to dilute Americans' taste for soda, energy drinks, sweetened tea and other sugary beverages should take their quest to school lunchrooms rather than legislative chambers, according to a recent study by media and health policy experts.

Soda taxes and beverage portion size restrictions were unpalatable to the 1,319 U.S. adults questioned in a fall 2012 survey as part of a study reported online March 10 in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

Adding front-of-package nutrition labels and removing sugary beverages from school environments garnered greater support: 65 percent and 62 percent, respectively - compared with 22 percent for taxes and 26 percent for portion size restrictions.

"I think these findings reflect public enthusiasm for regulation that maintains a value on consumer choice in the marketplace rather than government intervention, while tolerating more paternalism in restricting the choices available to children," said lead author Sarah Gollust, assistant professor in the Division of Health Policy and Management at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

The study is the first of its kind to assess the levels of public support for multiple policies to promote public health and prevent obesity through the reduced consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. It was conducted with Jeff Niederdeppe, assistant professor of communication at Cornell, and Colleen Barry at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of

Public Health.

"Strategies to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages are a key component of public health promotion and obesity prevention, yet the introduction of many of these policies has been met with political controversy," the study's authors. "The results provide policymakers and advocates with insights about the political feasibility of policy approaches to address the prevalent consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages."

Advocates of reduced sugar consumption might also want to borrow a page from the tobacco opponents' playbook, according to Niederdeppe, who has done research into the effectiveness of large-scale anti-tobacco media campaigns.

"Increasingly, health advocacy groups have focused attention on the behavior of the beverage industry, highlighting their marketing tactics aimed at young people and their heavily funded efforts to oppose regulation. And similar to the patterns we've seen over the years with big tobacco companies, people with negative views of soda companies are in favor of stricter regulations on their products," Niederdeppe said.

Other findings:

- Despite advocates' focus on promoting children's health and preventing obesity, the opinions of parents with children under 18 did not differ from those without children, nor did those categorized as overweight or obese have different opinions than those categorized as normal or underweight;
- Democrats were more likely to support all of the policies;
- The college educated were more supportive of most of the policies than those with less education;
- Age was generally not related to policy support, although those

aged 18-29 were more likely to support the sugar-sweetened beverages tax compared with older respondents;
- Women supported sugar-sweetened beverages portion size restrictions and restricting sugary drink advertisements in children's programming more than men; and
- Those with higher incomes expressed lower support for sugar-sweetened beverages taxes.

"Unlike many other health issues like alcohol and tobacco, parents have not yet been mobilized to advocate for policy strategies to change their children's beverage consumption," Niederdeppe said.

The findings of a strong positive relationship between years of education and policy support may suggest rising recognition among higher socio-economic status groups of the value of policy interventions to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, the study authors wrote.

The study, "Americans' Opinions About Policies to Reduce Consumption of Sugar-Sweetened Beverages," was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Healthy Eating Research Program.

More information: Sarah E. Gollust, Colleen L. Barry, Jeff Niederdeppe, "Americans' opinions about policies to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages," *Preventive Medicine*, Available online 11 March 2014, ISSN 0091-7435, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2014.03.002.

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