A Tax to Combat America’s Sugary Diet

 by Jane E. Brody

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A number of scientific studies have found that the amount of sugar we consume is a major factor in how big Americans have become. In the last half-century, consumption of sugars by the average American has increased by more than 24 pounds a year, expanding waistlines and crowding out more nutritious foods.

Furthermore, studies indicate that the main dietary culprit has been the ever-growing consumption of sugary drinks, especially soda. These soft drinks contribute 7 percent of the calories Americans consume, making them the leading source of added sugar and the single largest source of calories in our diet.

Critics have repeatedly blamed high-fructose corn syrup, the inexpensive sweetener that has helped to keep soda prices down and allowed consumption to soar. But in fact, no sugary beverage and no caloric sweetener is blameless. Not ordinary table sugar, not brown sugar or raw sugar; not honey; not agave syrup; not even fruit juice concentrate.

All these sweeteners contribute mostly empty calories that do little to satisfy the appetite and end up as excess energy that the body ultimately turns to fat. And soda is not the only one involved. In fact, after decades of increases, soda consumption has leveled off, but sports drinks, energy drinks and sweetened teas have become increasingly important contributors to the liquid calories Americans consume.

To improve the health of its residents and its coffers, New York State, among others, is considering an excise tax of about one penny per ounce on high-calorie sweetened beverages. The American Beverage Association, which takes major credit for an 88 percent reduction in sugared soda calories in the nation’s schools, has seriously undermined its credibility with ads opposing the so-called soda tax.

In association-sponsored commercials on television and radio, homemakers spout the spurious argument that such a tax would make it more difficult for them to feed their families. But on no nutritionist’s list are you likely to find soda listed as a desirable dietary ingredient. It is not a food, nor a basic necessity. In fact, the people likely to benefit most from a soda tax that discourages consumption are those who find it hardest to make ends meet. These are the people who can least afford to waste hard-earned dollars on empty calories that undermine their health.

When I was a child, the main parental objection to sugar was its role in tooth decay. But while rotten teeth are no fun, they are not nearly as likely to be life-threatening as what we now know to be the risks from excessive sugar intake, especially in liquid form. Most serious of these risks are Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, both as a direct consequence of extra body weight and, in the case of heart disease, as an independent risk.

A Harvard study that followed 88,000 women for 24 years found that regardless of body weight, the risk of developing heart disease increased by 20 percent among those who drank at least two sugar-sweetened drinks a day, when compared with those who drank less than one sugary drink a month. And among 4,000 men and women participating in the Framingham Heart Study for four years, those who drank at least one sugar-sweetened soft drink a day (compared with those who drank less) faced a 44 percent greater risk of developing metabolic syndrome, a precursor of heart disease. Again, the hazard was independent of weight.

Fructose, which represents half the sugar in soda and other drinks sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup, raises blood levels of triglycerides after meals and also promotes a gain in abdominal fat, both factors in metabolic syndrome.

Still, most Americans worry more about their weight than about health risks down the line. Study after study has shown that like experimental animals, people do not compensate for extra liquid calories by eating less food. Sugary drinks do little to curb the appetite, perhaps because they are metabolized so quickly.

In another Harvard study that followed 51,000 women for four years, those who increased their sugary soda consumption from a maximum of once a week to at least one drink a day gained the most weight. As a consequence, they also faced almost double the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.

The fructose in sodas may even promote overeating directly by its effect on the hormone leptin, which signals the brain that you’ve had enough to eat. In animal studies, high fructose intake over a period of months resulted in resistance to the leptin signal. A preliminary study in both obese and normal-weight men and women indicated that people react similarly.

In an article in The New England Journal of Medicine last year, Kelly D. Brownell, a professor at Yale, and Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, director of the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, wrote: “Sugared beverages are marketed extensively to children and adolescents, and in the mid-1990s, children’s intake of sugared beverages surpassed that of milk. For each extra can or glass of sugared beverage consumed per day, the likelihood of a child’s becoming obese increases by 60 percent.”

The authors cited a Yale study indicating that for every 10 percent increase in price, consumption of soda dropped by 7.8 percent. The beverage industry projected an even greater drop in sales: a 7.8 percent decline for every 6.8 percent price increase. In all likelihood, this decline would be offset by increased sales of diet drinks and bottled waters sold by the very same companies. Thus, a tax on sugared drinks would be unlikely to affect employment or commercial revenue.

Adding a penny-per-ounce excise tax on sugary soft drinks could reduce consumption by more than 10 percent and would generate an estimated $1.2 billion in New York State alone, the authors projected. At the same time, the resulting drop in consumption would reduce health risks and save money on medical costs related to excess weight and obesity, about half of which are paid for by government programs, they said.

“A poll of New York residents found that 52 percent supported a ‘soda tax,’ but the number rose to 72 percent when respondents were told that the revenue would be used for obesity prevention,” they wrote. “Perhaps the most defensible approach is to use revenue to subsidize the purchase of healthful foods.”

A tax that could raise revenue, cut consumption of sugar and raise consumption of vegetables and fruit? No wonder so many New Yorkers like the idea.

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