The Soda Tax: Potential Weapon in America’s War against Obesity

The soda tax debate has garnered big headlines in newspapers. It’s only fitting that the attention surrounding America’s obesity epidemic might come to rest on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). The nation’s penchant for soft drinks is on the rise; we now drink on average 50 gallons per person per year, about double the amount we drank in 1977.

Sugary beverages and weight. With SSBs—from sodas and sports drinks to waters and fruit-flavored drinks—on the rise, researchers are exploring their connection with weight. It’s a fact that if you drink a 12-ounce soft drink containing 150 calories every day on top of your normal diet, you’ll gain weight (about 15 pounds per year.) Soft drinks are the single largest contributor of calories in the U.S., according to a 2004 study published in Journal of Food Consumption and Analysis.

It also makes sense that you tend to feel less full when you drink your calories rather than eat them, which can lead you to consume more calories. In one 2000 study published in the International Journal of Obesity, researchers found that people don’t cut back on the calories they consume when they drink soda; suggesting that you don’t gain the same sense of fullness from drinking beverages than you do with eating the same amount of calories in solid food.

Two systematic reviews (American Journal of Public Health, 2007; American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 2006) that included studies investigating the effects of SSBs on health found that greater consumption of SSBs is linked with increased calorie intake, weight gain, diabetes and obesity. In 2009, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy released study findings that Californian adults who drink one or more sodas per day are 27 percent more likely to be overweight or obese than those who do not drink soda.

Taking sugary beverages to tax. In today’s political climate of health prevention, policy-makers are considering a number of measures to improve public health, including taxing SSBs. Several states have already implemented soft drink sales taxes. Health advocacy groups compare the potential of soda tax initiatives with the success of cigarette taxes. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a New Jersey-based organization devoted to public health, research shows that relatively large increases in taxes on tobacco products are the single most effective policy approach to reducing tobacco use.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University reports that taxes on soft drinks can achieve two goals: raise revenue for health and nutrition programs such as healthy foods for schools, and decrease the sales of relatively unhealthy beverages. The public advocacy group, Centers for Science in the Public Interrest, claims that taxing SSBs would help trim state budget deficits, consumers’ bulging waistlines and health care costs. A 2008 poll found that 72 percent of New Yorkers supported a tax on SSBs when they learned that it would raise funds to combat obesity in children and adults. The debate over soda taxes is still bubbling, but one thing’s for sure: it’s time to cut back on sugary beverages.

Looking Beyond Organics to Sustainability, a Growing Food Movement

When you’re shopping for tomatoes in the supermarket, which should you choose: The rock-hard, organic tomatoes from another country miles away or the conventionally grown, pesticide-sprayed tomatoes from the U.S.? These are the conundrums many consumers face when they go grocery shopping. Is organic always better?

Enter sustainability. Consider, in addition to organic, the concept of sustainability—the idea that a food system should maintain the health of the land, water, plants, animals, humans and natural resources for generations to come. There is a growing food movement, dubbed “beyond organic,” that’s pushing for organic foods to be more closely aligned to these principles. Purchasing produce shipped long distances, albeit organic produce, belies the idea of the sustainability concept.

Back to organic basics. Keep in mind that there are many documented benefits to eating organic. Organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are given no synthetic antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is also produced without the use of most conventional pesticides. There are positive environmental impacts associated with organic production, which include building soil quality and lowering energy inputs to produce crops. Nutritional benefits can also be gained by going organic. In a March 2008 State of Science review commissioned by the Organic Center (a nonprofit organization funded by private donors providing scientific information on organic production), researchers reviewed all scientific studies that compared the nutritional quality of organic vs. conventional crops since 1980. They discovered that organic foods were nutritionally superior for 11 nutrients in 61 percent of the comparisons. These nutrients included four measures of antioxidants (total phenolics, total antioxidative capacity, quercetin and kaempferol), three precursors of key vitamins (vitamins A, C and E), two minerals (potassium and phosphorous), nitrates (higher levels are a nutritional disadvantage), and protein.

Moving beyond organics. The beyond organics ideal doesn’t take away from the notion that organic production in general is better for people, communities and the environment, but it does ask consumers to look past organic labels to how foods are produced. The perfect example of moving beyond organics? Skip the long distance organic tomatoes in lieu of vine-ripened tomatoes from a local, organic farm. They’ll taste a lot better, too.