

Obesity Health Alliance

Briefing on the Soft Drinks Industry Levy – Summary

The Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) is a coalition of organisations committed to share expertise and support Government to tackle the issue of overweight and obesity in the UK. Obesity is a complex problem and there is no single silver bullet. A comprehensive range of population level policy interventions is required to tackle it.

Summary of policy

The Government should ensure the swift implementation of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy. In addition to the stated aim of promoting industry reformulation, this levy should also place emphasis on significantly reducing children’s consumption of free sugar from sugar-sweetened drinks. The impact of this levy should be monitored and evaluated annually with revenue raised reinvested in policies to decrease children’s obesity rates.

Key points

- More than one in five children are overweight or obese in their first year of school. By the time they leave primary school it is more than one in three.¹
- The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and World Health Organization (WHO) have recommended ‘free sugars’ should not make up more than 5% of daily energy intake for adults and children aged over 2.^{2,3}
- However, children’s caloric intake through free sugar remains staggeringly high. Children consume at least double more free sugar than the new guideline recommend, and sugary drinks remain their number one source of sugar.^{4,5}
- For the vast majority of the population sugar sweetened drinks offer no nutritional benefit over and above energy.
- We know that eating too much sugar can lead to weight gain and obesity, putting children at risk of serious preventable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart and liver disease and mental health problems plus tooth decay in the future.
- The health gains from the levy will be biggest for people on low incomes. Sugary drink consumption levels tend to be highest among the most disadvantaged children.
- We welcome the Government’s Soft Drinks Industry Levy to help children and adults cut down on their free sugarsⁱ intake from sugary drinks. The levy is a vital measure in the fight against overweight and obesity in the UK. In addition to promoting reformulation, the evidence is clear that a Soft Drinks Industry Levy is also likely to have a positive health impact by reducing consumption of sugary drinks.^{6,7} A 2016 modelling study found that the levy could potentially save up to 144,000 adults and children from obesity every year, prevent 19,000 cases of type 2 diabetes and avoid 270,000 decayed teeth.⁸
- It is important that the levy is evaluated so that it can be refined and adjusted to continually deliver public health gains.

ⁱ This comprises all monosaccharides and disaccharides added to foods by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juices. Under this definition lactose (the sugar in milk) when naturally present in milk and milk products and the sugars contained within the cellular structure of foods (particularly fruits and vegetables) are excluded.

Public support

- The Soft Drinks Industry Levy has been backed by public health organisations including individual members of this alliance, the WHO, Public Health England, Food Standards Scotland, and the House of Commons Health Select Committee.^{9,10,11,12}
- More than 155,000 people supported a petition to introduce a sugary drinks tax.¹³ Polling from December 2016 found that 57% of the public support a tax on sugary drinks and 66% of people would support an increase in the price of sugary drinks.¹⁴

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References

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