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News

Soda tax to combat obesity not gaining support

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Although it is only an idea so far, the need to impose a federal tax on highly sugared drinks to combat obesity is not something many people are swallowing.

"I really don't think that taxing soda is going to help anyone," said Matthew Harris, 34, of Bristol. "People will continue to do what they do, just like smoking. You can keep taxing but if they want to drink soda or eat junk food they are going to keep doing it."

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, suggested that Congress look at imposing a federal tax on these drinks during a press conference at the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program held last week in New Haven, where the rise in childhood obesity was the hot topic.

Although not officially on the table, according to a DeLauro representative, the tax is just a proposal the New Haven Democrat wants Congress to consider.

Don Toewz, of Bristol, opted for a healthier drink with his lunch at the Super Natural Market & Deli in Bristol on a recent day, but said he occasionally likes to have a soda with his meal.

Toewz said a soda tax will not make a dent in obesity, just in taxpayers' pockets.

"I don't think it is really going to matter," he said. "People will keep buying what they want. It's just going to cost us more."

According to the state's Department of Public Health, obesity is the second-leading cause of preventable death in the United States after smoking, and in just over one generation, U.S. rates of obesity have approximately tripled among preschoolers and adolescents, and quadrupled among children aged 6 to 11 years.

"We need to do more to improve access to affordable, healthy foods and to make healthy choices easy choices for everyone," said DeLauro, who said the sugary drink's low prices make the choice easier for low-income families looking to "stretch" a dollar. "A comprehensive approach is necessary, including supporting the production of fruits and vegetables, encourage marketing of nutritious foods to kids, and addressing the situation in the marketplace."

Tricia Erickson, a clinical nutritionist at Bristol Hospital, said the soda tax would have to be pretty high to make a significant impact on obesity.

“Something has to be done to combat obesity, this is a good start.” she said. “We need to put higher tax on all the bad stuff and make the healthy stuff more affordable to families.”

Erikson said society is just starting to see the effects of unhealthy eating habits in children. “Kids are being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol,” she said. “These used to be adult diseases that are now becoming childhood diseases and we really don’t understand why or how this is happening.”

Dr. Robert Dudley, a pediatrician with the Community Health Center of New Britain said the only way to get people back on a healthy track and reverse society’s “super-size me” bad habits of consuming high-caloried drinks and food must start at the government level.

“This will involve the policy makers, marketing experts, doctors, nutritionists, and school officials all working together to help people make the right choices.”

At a recent ‘Weight of the Nation’ conference in Washington, D.C., which Dudley attended, touched on the policy changes that need to be implemented in order to help children and adults get healthy.

Like DeLauro, Dudley said the main change is making healthy alternatives less expensive for families.

“Right now 40 percent of New Britain school children in elementary and middle school levels are obese,” said Dudley. “That is a huge percentage and something needs to be done to correct it.”

Dudley said one of the easiest ways to go about reducing obesity is by cutting out high-sugar drinks.

“This is often the first place many folks will start to get rid of ‘bad’ calories when they are looking to go the healthy route,” he said.

Denise Monahan, of Southington, said she is all for a tax on soda.

“I really think it starts at home with the parents,” Monahan said. “I’ve seen children at the playground taking sips of their mother’s soda. I think that’s where the childhood obesity starts.”

Karen Hanretty, vice president of public affairs of the American Beverage Association said obesity is more than just about drinking high-calorie drinks.

“Obesity is a complex problem that won’t be solved by taxing soft drinks. Singling out one food or beverage to blame for obesity is overly simplistic and will not yield any meaningful impact on obesity-related health conditions,” Hanretty said. “Independent data cited by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show calories from added sugars from soda are down 39 percent since 2000.

“If calories and added sugars consumed from beverages are going down and obesity is going up, soft drinks are not to blame for the obesity epidemic, the math just doesn’t work.”

Farooq Mohammad, owner of Sunoco station on King Street in Bristol, said, “We are already the highest taxed state in the country,” he said. “They want to raise taxes and want people to buy. If they really want to get rid of obesity they should shutdown McDonald’s or Pizza Hut not tax sodas.”

Because the soda tax is only a proposal at this time, it is not known how high of a tax will be placed on sugary drinks, according to DeLauro’s office.

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