

NY seeks to ban sugary drinks from food stamp buys

October 7 2010, By SARA KUGLER FRAZIER , Associated Press
Writer

(AP) -- New Yorkers on food stamps would not be allowed to spend them on sugar-sweetened drinks under an obesity-fighting proposal being floated by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Gov. David Paterson.

Bloomberg and Paterson planned to announce Thursday that they are seeking permission from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the nation's food stamp program, to add [sugary drinks](#) to the list of prohibited goods for city residents receiving assistance.

If approved, it would be the first time an item would be banned from the federal program based solely on nutritional value.

The idea has been suggested previously, including in 2008 in Maine, where it drew criticism from advocates for the poor who argued it unfairly singled out low-income people and risked scaring off potential needy recipients.

And in 2004 the USDA rejected Minnesota's plan to ban junk food, including soda and candy, from food stamp purchases, saying it would violate the Food Stamp Act's definition of what is food and could create "confusion and embarrassment" at the register.

The food stamp system, which was launched in the 1960s, serves some 40 million Americans a month and does not currently restrict any other foods based on nutrition. Recipients can essentially buy any food for the

household, although there are some limits on hot or prepared foods.

Food stamps also cannot be used to buy alcohol, cigarettes or items such as pet food, vitamins or household goods.

The city and state proposal would be temporary, so officials could study its effects over two years. It would apply only to food stamp recipients in New York City - 1.7 million of the city's more than 8 million residents - and would not affect the amount of assistance they receive.

"This initiative will give New York families more money to spend on foods and drinks that provide real nourishment," said a statement from Bloomberg, who also has outlawed trans-fats in restaurant food and has forced chain restaurants to post calorie counts on menus.

In fiscal year 2009, New Yorkers received \$2.7 billion in food stamp benefits and spent \$75 million to \$135 million of that on sugary drinks, the city said.

The ban would apply to any beverage that contains more than 10 calories per 8 ounces, except for milk products, milk substitutes like soy milk and rice milk, and fruit juices without added sugar.

A 20-ounce sugar-sweetened drink can contain as many as 16 packets of sugar.

There still are many unhealthful products New Yorkers could purchase with food stamps, including potato chips, ice cream and candy. But officials said the proposal targets sugary drinks because they are the largest contributor to obesity.

"We continue to see a dramatic rise in obesity among children, especially in low-income communities," state Department of Health Commissioner

Richard Daines said. "This initiative targets a major public health threat - the high consumption of sugary beverages - which have little to no [nutritional value](#)."

More than half of adult New York City residents are overweight or obese, along with nearly 40 percent of public school students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

City officials said lower-income residents are most likely to drink one or more sugar-sweetened drink a day; type 2 diabetes is also twice as common among poor New Yorkers compared to the wealthiest.

The USDA had no immediate comment Thursday on the proposal.

The department recently launched a pilot program to encourage [food stamp](#) recipients to make more healthful choices in their food shopping. Under the program, involving 7,500 randomly selected households in Massachusetts, participants get 30 cents added to their benefit balances for every dollar they spend on fruits and vegetables - which reduces the cost of fresh produce by almost one-third.

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Citation: NY seeks to ban sugary drinks from food stamp buys (2010, October 7) retrieved 12 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-10-ny-sugary-food.html>

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