

New study: Evidence clearly favors taxing sugary drinks

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New Zealand should follow the UK and more than 30 other countries in

introducing a tax on sugary drinks to tackle obesity and reduce deaths from chronic diseases, leading researchers say.

In a review of recent international and New Zealand research on the impact of food and beverage taxes, the researchers identify the strong level of scientific evidence showing such taxes work.

The lead author, Professor Nick Wilson from the University of Otago, Wellington, says the UK's Soft Drinks Industry Levy, known as the "sugar tax," introduced in April 2018, has prompted manufacturers to significantly reduce the amount of sugar they add to soft drinks.

"Imposing a levy on soft drinks would be in line with the Government's priorities on improving well-being and protecting [child health](#), and would be consistent with New Zealand's approach to taxing tobacco and alcohol to reduce the burden of harm from these products."

Another one of the authors, Professor Boyd Swinburn from the University of Auckland's School of Population Health, says dietary risk factors and high body mass index are leading causes of [health](#) loss in New Zealand, when death and disability are combined.

"In this country, around a third of adults are obese, and diet-related diseases, such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes are major causes of premature death."

Professor Swinburn says diet-related diseases are a particular burden for Māori and Pasifika and are a major cause of ethnic inequalities in health in New Zealand.

A [sugar tax](#) would help the government achieve its goals of preventing obesity in children and young people and reducing health inequities for Māori and Pacific peoples, he says.

"A tax could provide greater benefit to Māori and Pacific populations because of greater price sensitivity, and among children and [young people](#) because of their higher consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks."

The nutritional content of processed food is largely unregulated in New Zealand, with no limit to the amount of sugar, salt or saturated fat which can be added.

"None of the damage to the health of New Zealanders and the public health system costs associated with processed food are specifically paid for by the food industry, with the costs largely borne by the taxpayer-funded health system, and by the individuals and their families."

Professor Wilson says a 20 percent tax on sugar-sweetened beverages would raise an estimated NZ\$40 million a year, which could be recycled back into the community.

"The government could use the money to fund free fully-subsidized healthy breakfasts and lunches in all low-income schools and early childhood education centers, and ensure adequate drinking water fountains were provided in all public spaces."

The findings of this review form the basis of the position of the Health Coalition Aotearoa, a new non-governmental organization which includes New Zealand health workers and researchers with expertise in nutrition.

The article, "Food Taxes and Subsidies to Protect Health: Relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand," is published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal*.

More information: Food taxes and subsidies to protect health: relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Medical Journal*:

www.nzma.org.nz/journal-article...aotearoa-new-zealand

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