

Scientists say sugar is as toxic as alcohol - and there should be a drinking age for soda

By

Sophie Bushwick

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Comments (224)

Sure, sugar's bad for you. But should we establish a drinking age for sugary sodas? According to UC San Francisco pediatric endocrinologist Robert Lustig, the answer is emphatically yes. He says that added sweeteners have health effects comparable to alcohol and tobacco, and should be regulated accordingly. In a comment piece for the journal *Nature*, Lustig and his colleagues argue that the state should selectively block access to sugar, using some pretty stiff rules.

For years, Lustig has advocated against added sugar, specifically sweeteners that include fructose. In the recent opinion piece, Lustig and his colleagues Laura A. Schmidt and Claire D. Brindis point out that fructose and other sugars can cause liver toxicity, among other chronic diseases. They write:

A little is not a problem, but a lot kills - slowly. If international bodies are truly concerned about public health, they must consider limiting fructose - and its main delivery vehicles, the added sugars HFCS and sucrose - which pose dangers to individuals and to society as a whole.

To restrict sugar, the researchers start with ideas drawn from existing alcohol and tobacco restrictions. They suggest establishing taxes on "sweetened fizzy drinks (soda), other sugar-sweetened beverages (for example, juice, sports drinks and chocolate milk) and sugared cereal." In addition, they advocate that we reduce the availability of sugar, particularly to children. This restriction would make it more difficult for vending machines to sell sweet drinks and sugary snacks in schools and in workplaces, building on already existing regulations that have removed sodas from some schools.

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But there are even bigger steps to be taken in limiting the availability of added sugars. Lustig et. al. write:

States could apply zoning ordinances to control the number of fast-food outlets and convenience stores in low-income communities, and especially around schools, while

providing incentives for the establishment of grocery stores and farmer's markets. Another option would be to limit sales during school operation, or to designate an age limit (such as 17) for the purchase of drinks with added sugar, particularly soda. Indeed, parents in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, recently took this upon themselves by lining up outside convenience stores and blocking children from entering them after school. Why couldn't a public-health directive do the same?

Refusing to allow fast food restaurants in certain areas? Banning children from convenience stores? I just can't see anyone accepting changes this radical. Do the researchers really think that people will sit back and let the government take away pastries, candy, and soda? Over our pudgy dead bodies. Surprisingly, the researchers don't see sugar cravings as their biggest obstacle.

They write:

Regulating sugar will not be easy - particularly in the 'emerging markets' of developing countries where soft drinks are often cheaper than potable water or milk. We recognize that societal intervention to reduce the supply and demand for sugar faces an uphill political battle against a powerful sugar lobby, and will require active engagement from all stakeholders.

So the scientists think the biggest problem with regulating sugar is the sugar lobby*. But even without the lobbyists, would people ever cede their right to eat sweets?

Though sugar undoubtedly causes disease, I have a hard time accepting that we'll see the establishment of sugar regulations. And it's not just because the populace would rise up in protest.

One impetus for tobacco and alcohol regulations is protecting others. Tobacco can cause cancer in the smoker *and* those who are exposed to second-hand smoke. Alcohol is not only an addictive substance that can poison the body in large enough quantities, but also impairs judgment to the point where a drinker might, say, get into a car and plow into another vehicle or a pedestrian. The government doesn't regulate these substances just to protect the smokers and drinkers, it does so to protect others *from* the smokers and drinkers. Unless we discover that sugar hurts the people who watch us eat it, strict restrictions may be a long time coming.