

The low down on South Africa's Sugar Tax

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The Minister of Finance announced in the February 2016 National Budget a decision to introduce a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), with effect from 1 April 2017, to help reduce excessive sugar intake by South Africans. The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) welcomes this step as one part of the solution to address the obesity problem and improve the health of South Africans.



How much sugar do South Africans really consume?

When you think of sugar-sweetened beverages, the first thing that comes to mind is the regular fizzy drink, but the term encompasses far more than that. SSBs are beverages containing added sweeteners that provide energy ('calories' or kilojoules) such as sucrose, high-fructose corn syrup or fruit-juice concentrates. This includes carbonated drinks (fizzy soft drinks and energy drinks), non-carbonated drinks (sports drinks, iced teas, vitamin water drinks and juice concentrates), sweetened milk drinks and sweetened fruit juices. And many of us do not realise just how much sugar is found in these drinks. For example, a 330ml bottle of iced tea has a little over six teaspoons of sugar!

ADSA is concerned that the intake of added sugars (sugars added to foods and drinks during processing by the food manufacturing companies, cook or consumer) is increasing in South Africa, both in adults and children. Some estimate that children typically consume approximately 40-60 g/day of added sugar, possibly rising to as much as 100 g/day in adolescents. High intakes of added sugar, particularly as SSBs, has been shown to lead to weight gain and cause dental caries. The added sugar in these drinks makes them high in energy (kilojoules). Because these drinks don't make us feel full in the same way that eating food does, most of us don't reduce our food intake to compensate, making it easy to consume too many kilojoules. Over time, these extra kilojoules can cause one to become overweight, putting us at risk for diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. Obesity is already a massive problem in South Africa, with two in three women and one in three men being overweight or obese, as well as almost one in four children.

What is ADSA's recommendation for sugar intake?

ADSA supports the recommendations by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the South African Food-Based Dietary Guidelines that we need to reduce the intake of beverages and foods that contain added sugars, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, sweetened yoghurts, frozen desserts, some breakfast cereals, ready-to-use sauces, cereal bars, health, savoury and sweet biscuits, baked products, canned or packaged fruit products, sweets and chocolates. The WHO advises reducing the intake of free sugars found in foods and beverages (including added sugars, but excluding sugars naturally present in fresh fruits, vegetables and milk) to less than 10% of total energy (kilojoule) intake for the day (i.e. 50 g of sugar, which is approximately 12 teaspoons per day), with a conditional recommendation to further reduce intake to 5% of total energy (approximately 6 teaspoons per day) for additional health benefits. The South African Food-Based Dietary Guidelines also advise to 'use sugar and foods and drinks high in sugar sparingly'. To put this into perspective, a 500ml bottle of a carbonated drink will provide your maximum sugar allowance for an entire day!

The sugar tax – is it a good idea?

The proposed tax on SSBs will mean roughly a 20% tax will be added on to sugary drinks, which is intended to decrease the purchase and consumption of SSBs. Encouragingly, in Mexico, a sugar tax has reduced sugary drink sales by 12% in the first year. The sugar tax is likely to affect shelf prices, but will also motivate manufacturers to reduce the amount of sugar added to their products.

ADSA welcomes the proposed tax on SSBs, but acknowledges that the sugar tax is only **part** of the solution to address the growing obesity problem. Just as taxing tobacco does not reduce or stop smoking by all people, taxing SSBs will not reduce or stop all purchasing and consumption of SSBs and reduce obesity on its own. Obesity is a complex condition, and sugar is not the only cause. There is a need for multiple interventions across a variety of different sectors to address unhealthy diets and lifestyles and have an impact on the obesity epidemic. ADSA recommends that revenue generated from the tax should go towards health promoting interventions, such as subsidies to reduce the costs of fruits and vegetables, education around healthy choices and creating an enabling environment to make those healthier choices easier.

In addition to reducing the consumption of SSBs to prevent obesity and promote long-term health, ADSA continues to recommend a healthy diet which includes whole grains, fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes, healthy oils, proteins such as lean meats and seafood, and a reduced intake of processed meats and salt, accompanied by regular physical activity.

ADSA's detailed **Position Statement on the Proposed Taxation of Sugar-Sweetened Beverages**, with references, can be accessed here: http://www.adsa.org.za/Portals/14/Documents/2016/Nov/ADSA%20Position%20Statement%20on%20Sugar%20Tax_Final_28%20Nov%202016.pdf

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The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) is the professional organisation for Registered Dietitians. The primary aims of the Association are to serve the interests of dietitians in South Africa and promote the nutritional well being of the community.

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