



New York State Public Health Association (NYSPHA)

Food policy in New York State

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

January 25, 2010

NYSPHA strongly supports calorie labeling in restaurants, sugar sweetened beverage taxes, and a ban on trans fats in restaurants. All are evidence-based policy interventions that would significantly contribute to improving the public's health, especially if implemented together. New York's Tobacco control program has demonstrated very well the public health benefits of creating synergy by using a comprehensive, policy-based approach.

What is the evidence that these approaches are effective in reducing obesity and improving public health?

Calorie labeling –

Chain restaurants are an appropriate target given that Americans' average calorie intake increased by almost 200 calories per day between 1977 (average: 1,791 calories) and 1996 (average: 1,985). Restaurants and fast-food accounted for the fastest growing source of those calories.

It is also important to point out that a majority (62 to 87 percent) of consumers in six nationally representative polls said they support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information.

Before any new policy intervention can be evaluated in terms of a long term outcome such as reducing obesity, the impact of the policy must be evaluated regarding its impact on changing the behaviors that contribute to obesity.

A 2009 article in the Journal of the American Public Health Association reported that Calorie labels on restaurant menus impacted food choices and reduced caloric intake by 14% and that adding a recommended daily caloric requirement label increased this effect.

According to a recent Yale Rudd Center Report:

- Almost half (48 percent) of American adults say reading the nutrition information on food labels made them change their purchasing habits.
- When given nutrition information on food served in restaurants, diners are 24 to 37 percent less likely to choose high-calorie menu items.
- A study in New York City showed that the fast-food customers who saw calorie information displayed bought 52 fewer calories than those who didn't see the information.

A 2009 analysis of 100 million transactions over 14 months at Starbucks by researchers at Stanford University showed that when calories were posted prominently, the average number of calories per transaction fell by 6 percent. People who typically purchase more than 250 calories cut the calories in what they bought by even more—26%.

Perhaps more importantly, menu labeling provides motivation to chain restaurants to change their menu offerings. It is a way of keeping the industry honest since chain restaurants benefit from the fact that most people, even dietitians in one study, underestimate the number of calories in their entrees and beverages- by 600 calories on average. Already, because of the New York City and other recent menu labeling laws passed, some chains have begun menu makeovers. KFC now has a 395-calorie grilled chicken meal, served with green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy. Uno Chicago Grill is selling a 550-calorie roasted vegetable and feta wrap on a whole-wheat and flaxseed tortilla. Starbucks has introduced four sandwiches with 400 calories or fewer. And all of the coffee company's 11,000 or so stores have a campaign to promote beverages under 90 calories.

Sugar sweetened beverage tax -

As the single largest contributor to weight gain, sugar sweetened beverages is an appropriate place to focus a policy intervention. Sugar-sweetened beverages now supply 10% to 15% of total daily calories, both in children and adults. Studies reveal that teenage boys who drink carbonated or non-carbonated soft drinks consume an average of three 12-ounce cans per day, and girls more than two cans. Harvard researchers found that each additional 12- ounce soft drink consumed per day increases the risk of a child becoming obese by 60 percent.

We know that economic incentives are among the most effective tools to change behavior. Tobacco and alcohol taxes have been very well studied and have been successfully employed across the developing world to reduce consumption and improve health outcomes. The economic literature on the price elasticity of demand is well established. Basically the sale of any consumer product will be reduced when the price is increased in the marketplace. Based on a review of the evidence, the sugar sweetened beverage tax will raise revenue, reduce consumption and improve our population's health.

The tax not only has the support of many health groups but is also supported by a majority of New York voters according to a December, 2008 statewide poll commissioned by the Citizens' Committee for Children. The poll confirmed that 72 percent of voters supported a

tax on sugar-sweetened beverages when a portion of the revenue would be spent on obesity prevention programs.

Trans fat ban –

Studies have shown that the consumption of trans fats increases a person's risk of heart disease, this nation's biggest killer. As a result, the US Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting the amount of trans fatty acids to as little as possible. The problem has been that manufacturers and restaurants have added hydrogenated oils extensively to help increase the shelf life of food products. Food companies are now required to include trans fats on labels in grocery stores. Since New York City and other localities have begun prohibiting foods with trans fats from being served in restaurants, the manufacturers have been reformulating their products to remove trans fats. The reformulation of food products to remove trans fats is a clear indication that the law is working as intended but should be implemented statewide. All people deserve to be protected from trans fats in our food.

What are the non-health implications of these policies?

Calorie labeling –

Menu labeling has been easily implemented by restaurants in New York City and other places. Chain restaurants update their menus frequently anyway making adding calories easy and inexpensive to do.

Sugar sweetened beverage tax -

The purpose of the sugar-sweetened beverage tax is to both reduce consumption of sugared beverages and to raise revenue that will help offset New York State's annual \$7.6 billion in obesity related medical expenditures. This tax is unique in that it will have fiscal impact in both directions. It will not only bring in much needed revenue that can be used to reduce cuts to healthcare but will also help ultimately lower the state's cost for health care helping to reduce and prevent obesity.

These food policies are important vehicles for holding the food industry accountable for their manufacturing and marketing practices that are designed to maximize profit by getting us to consume more. Unfortunately their success is our loss as the economic costs of treating obesity related chronic illness such as heart disease and cancer is enormous and gets passed on to taxpayers and employers. The proposed policies being considered are population reaching, evidence based approaches that are very reasonable given the serious human and economic threat to the state due to obesity caused disease and poor health.