Abstract CP2.06

Should the soft drinks industry levy (“the sugar tax”) be framed as a childhood obesity intervention?

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Introduction: The Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) came into effect on the 6th of April 2018 and it is designed to tackle Sugar Sweetened Beverages (SSBs); the largest contributor of sugar in children’s diets. It has been mandated as part of the Childhood Obesity Plan and is projected to result in an 8.55% reduction in the rates of children and adolescents who are obese (Briggs et al., 2016). To understand more about the potential impacts of action on SSBs, this study aimed to consider the characteristics of children in the UK who drink, and do not drink, SSBs and the impact of overall energy intake.

Methodology: Data from 4-day estimated food diaries of 1298 children aged 4-10 years from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey Rolling program from 2008 to 2016 were analysed using SPSS version 24. Based upon their consumption or not, children were categorised as “drinkers” and “non-drinkers” of SSBs. Other variables included child age, gender, weight classification (IOTF cut-offs calculated from weight (kgs) and height (cm) (Cole et al. 2007)), total energy requirements for age, total energy intake (<90% of energy requirement met by intake taken as lower than recommended energy intake, 90-100% as met recommended energy intake, >110% above recommended energy intake), and Non-Milk Extrinsic Sugar (NMES) intake (<5% of total energy requirement as low NMES intake, 5–10% as medium NMES intake, >10% as high NMES intakes)(WHO, 2015).

Results: The consumption of NMES from food and drink within the total population was higher than recommended in 78.4% (n = 1017) children and significantly higher among the 790 (60.86%) of children classified as drinkers of SSBs (67.6%, n = 688) compared to non-drinkers (32.2%, n = 329). However, 78.1% (n = 617) children who were drinkers of SSBs did not exceed their total energy requirements and there was no significant difference between the two groups of drinkers and non-drinkers in terms of age, gender or body weight classification.

Conclusion: In this representative sample of UK children, high intake of NMES was not directly correlated with high energy consumption, therefore, depending on a single-nutrient approach in tackling childhood obesity might not be the most effective. Furthermore, SSB drinking is not a behaviour particular to children with a higher body weight, on the contrary, framing sugar reduction in tackling obesity might reinforce negative stereotypes around “unhealthy dieting”. More equitably, policies should focus on those children whose consumption of SSBs significantly increases their total NMES.

Reference