

MARY CUSHMAN: SUGARY DRINK TAX A WIN-WIN FOR VERMONT

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Editor's note: This commentary is by Mary Cushman, MD, who is a professor at the University of Vermont Medical Center and the board director of the American Heart Association Vermont.

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in Vermont and should be treated as a public health crisis. The annual \$202 million cost to treat obesity-caused illnesses in Vermont will skyrocket further if we do nothing.

Vermont's obesity rate has climbed steadily since 1990 from nearly 11 percent to 24.7 percent. Although we have lower rates than many other states, the "State of Obesity" report by the Trust for America's Health projects that Vermont's current 38,000 cases of heart disease will shoot to 190,000 by 2030 without intervention. Diabetes will increase by 50 percent and cancer will more than double.

Vermont is also facing a fiscal crisis: the state budget deficit stands at \$100 million.

There is one proven public policy tool can help solve both of these problems: a two cent per ounce excise tax on sugary drinks — the largest single source of added sugar in the American diet.

Tobacco taxation has been one of the most effective public health measures in recent decades. The tobacco tax in Vermont succeeded in reducing smoking and raising revenue to help pay for vital public health programs like Medicaid. Along with Vermont's comprehensive tobacco control program, it's helped cut youth smoking rates in half. A sugary drink tax modeled on that success can reduce obesity and provide funding for health care to those most in need.

We'll all survive just fine with a few less sugary drinks. But there are many Vermonters currently struggling to afford health care and feed their families well. According to the Vermont Department of Health, Vermonters with low incomes have:

- Two times the rate of obesity;
- Are three times more likely to have diabetes;
- Are four times more likely to have a heart attack; and
- Are two and a half times more likely to have a stroke.

Prevention of these disorders is key. A tax on sugary drinks will lower health care costs long term and reduce the state's financial burden. It will help low-income Vermonters most. Nearly \$57 million of the \$202 million Vermont spends annually treating obesity-caused diseases is in the Medicaid program, which is contributing to the deficit Vermont faces. We aren't doing enough to reduce either.

Sugary drinks are responsible for at least one-fifth of the weight gained in the last 30 years in the United States. They are like jet fuel to obesity.

If we direct a portion of that new revenue to initiatives that expand access to nutritious fruits and vegetables and opportunities for physical activity in our communities, we can start to address of the obesity epidemic.

This is because our bodies process liquid sugar differently than sugar in solid foods. With food, sugar is released slowly into the bloodstream because the food takes longer to digest. But the sugar from drinks moves quickly and delivers more sugar to the body's vital organs than they can handle. Over time, the pancreas and liver can become overloaded, causing diabetes, heart disease and liver disease.

This blast of sugar also causes the body to produce fat, which ends up increasing the risk for heart attack and stroke.

As a Vermont physician, I have seen examples of patients who tell me they simply cut sugary drinks from their diet after experiencing a life threatening illness and experienced dramatic weight loss. It works!

A two cent per ounce excise tax on sugary drinks could raise over \$30 million in new revenue in its first year, while encouraging Vermonters to make healthier choices in the beverage aisle.

If we direct a portion of that new revenue to initiatives that expand access to nutritious fruits and vegetables and opportunities for physical activity in our communities, we can start to address of the obesity epidemic. Over time, that will save Vermonters from the suffering that obesity-related diseases cause and save money that would otherwise be spent on treating those diseases.

It's time to take this important step forward. As a state, our physical and fiscal health may depend on it. Please support a two cent per ounce excise tax on sugary drinks.