

Karen Telleen-Lawton: The Bittersweet Truth About a Spoonful of Sugar

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 01.24.2013 4:52 p.m.



Maybe it's coincidental that the coldest months of the year are the ones into which we pack our densest consumption of sugar. From Halloween through Christmas and into Valentine's Day, we throw discipline to the wind and chow on candy cars, candy canes and candy hearts. There's nothing wrong with a little indulgence, unless you count tooth decay, diabetes, heart disease and myriad obesity-related syndromes.

One-third of American adults and nearly 50 percent of children are obese, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). It's another one of those gnarly public/private issues — a personal choice issue that greatly affects public costs. Fortunately, there's a win-win solution with a no-no phrase: sugar tax.

Lest this sound radical and new, let me quote the father of economics, [Adam Smith](#). In his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), he opined: "Sugar, rum and tobacco are commodities which are nowhere necessities of life, [but] which are ... objects of almost universal consumption and which are therefore extremely proper subjects of taxation." A whiskey tax began in 1791, with tobacco following soon after. These taxes have been shown to be effective. Taxes on alcohol and on tobacco are each inversely related to the diseases and deaths attributable to their use.

Many states, including California, already have a tax on soft drinks. But research shows that small taxes, on the order of 1 to 12 percent, do not change behavior. It takes a bigger stick. A recent [University of California](#) study projects that a 1-cent-per-ounce tax on sweetened beverages (adding about 20 cents to the cost of a \$1.25 bottle of soda) would prevent in a decade:

» close to 2.4 million cases of diabetes

- » 95,000 cases of heart disease
- » 8,000 strokes
- » 26,000 premature deaths

What a gift to those millions of people, plus their families and friends! Society's interest, however, is the public cost of processed sugar. Researchers project that this level of tax would yield \$17 billion in health-care cost savings over 10 years and \$13 billion in tax revenues. Presumably, most or all of the tax revenue would be spent on public service ads and health costs; we'd have to watchdog this.



The American Heart Association recommends limiting sugar intake to 3 teaspoons (12 grams) for children, 5 teaspoons (20 grams) for women and 9 teaspoons (36 grams) for men.

A few people — those with great self-discipline or devoid of a sweet tooth — keep their diet free of processed sugar. For the rest of us, the [American Heart Association](#) recommends limiting our sugar intake to 3 teaspoons (12 grams) for children, 5 teaspoons (20 grams) for women and 9 teaspoons (36 grams) for men. The average American intake now is 22 grams per day. The natural sugar in fruits and vegetables is part of a healthy diet and doesn't count in the processed sugar total.

David and I are both incurable dark chocolate lovers and (coincidentally) victims of the middle-age bulge. I'm thinking what might work is a new product: a daily chocolate allowance dispenser. A 30-section dark chocolate bar with each square containing 20 grams of sugar would make a great Valentine's Day gift.

On second thought, I see that each square in a Trader Joe's Pound Plus bar contains just a bit over 4 grams of sugar. In theory, I could have more than four squares per day if I had no other processed sugar during the day. It must not be my one-square-a-day allowance that's hurting me, so I guess it's back to reading the labels.

Maybe the tax could pay for a bigger font size on the nutrition labels, so I could actually read them.

— Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations spanning sustainability from the environment to finance, economics and justice issues. She is a fee-only financial advisor (www.DecisivePath.com) and a freelance writer (www.CanyonVoices.com). [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are her own.