

HealthAffairs

Contact: Rebecca Oren 203-436-2513, cell 203-285-5961 or rebecca.oren@yale.edu
Helen Dodson 203-436-3984 or helen.dodson@yale.edu

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Strong Policies and Regulations Can Support Individuals and Families in Helping to Prevent Childhood Obesity, National Experts Say

PRESS RELEASE

New Haven, Conn. – Increased personal responsibility certainly will play a role in efforts to combat obesity, but collective action to support enhanced personal responsibility is essential. That’s according to a commentary in the March issue of *Health Affairs* by Kelly Brownell, director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, and co-authors. They argue that government at all levels should use policy and regulation to help make the healthy choice the easy choice to prevent obesity and support individuals’ efforts to lead healthy lives.

“The use of collective action to support personal responsibility is central to public health,” Brownell and co-authors write. “The challenge is to combine personal and collective responsibility approaches in ways that best serve the public good.”

According to recent government data, nearly one third of U.S. children and adolescents ages 2 to 19, or more than 23 million youth, are overweight or obese. Over the past 40 years, these rates have more than quadrupled among children ages 6 to 11, and more than tripled for adolescents ages 12 to 19. Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to suffer from a variety of health problems, including higher cholesterol levels and increased chances of type 2 diabetes.

Brownell and colleagues note that many public health threats, including infectious disease and tobacco use, have been effectively addressed through a combination of strong policy action and personal responsibility. The authors present four specific policy approaches that could help government play an effective role in obesity prevention and support individuals’ own efforts to lead healthier lives:

Ensuring Food and Menu Labels Contain Accurate Information

Brownell and co-authors note that, although individuals make their own decisions about what foods to purchase and eat, effective policy and regulation can make such decisions easier. They describe current menu-labeling efforts in New York City, which a study from 2009 has indicated contributed to the reduction of calories purchased at certain food and beverage chains. The authors also highlight “Smart Choices,” a program created by the food industry that set nutrition standards for certain foods. When it was revealed that foods such as mayonnaise and Lucky Charms were being labeled “Smart Choices,” the Federal Drug Administration—which regulates food labeling—and the Connecticut Attorney General—who could enforce consumer protection laws forbidding misleading claims—took action resulting in the industry’s withdrawal of the program.

Limiting the Extent and Type of Food and Beverage Marketing

Aggressive and pervasive food marketing negatively impacts the nations' diet and health, the authors say, citing a 2009 report on the marketing of breakfast cereals which "found almost perfect overlap between the cereals with the worst nutrition ratings and those marketed most aggressively to children." However, they say that numerous state and federal policymakers and agencies, including state Attorneys General, Congress, the Federal Trade Commission, Federal Drug Administration and U.S. Department of Agriculture all have the authority to influence the way foods are marketed, particularly to children and in schools.

Regulating Food Ingredients and Safety

The federal government has broad authority to determine and regulate the safety of foods or food additives, according to Brownell and his co-authors. They point to recent efforts in New York City that banned trans fats from all city restaurants. They note that, while the banning of trans fats is unlikely to impact obesity rates, it could set a precedent for future regulation of other ingredients such as salt or sugar.

Taxing Unhealthy Foods and Beverages

One of the more controversial policy efforts to create healthier food environments is to tax unhealthy foods or beverages, especially sugar-sweetened beverages such as sodas. The most common proposal for such a tax consists of a penny per ounce tax on drinks with added sugars or other sweeteners, with revenues being used to fund obesity prevention programs or to help make healthy fruits and vegetables more affordable. Brownell also notes that while opponents of such a tax say that it would disproportionately affect lower-income populations, this could be a benefit because obesity and related health problems are also more common in lower-income areas.

Throughout the commentary, Brownell and co-authors recognize that individual efforts to lead healthier lives will play an important role in reversing the obesity epidemic. However, they emphasize that government policy and regulation can play a large role in the effort, and that governments have numerous options for doing so, concluding that such efforts can "increase personal responsibility, help individuals meet personal goals, and reduce the nation's health care costs."

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