

# Sugar should be controlled like alcohol: Report

BY MARGARET MUNRO, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 1, 2012



Many schools have removed pop and candy from vending machines, but "often replaced them with juice and sports drinks, which also contain added sugar," the report says.

**Photograph by:** Justin Sullivan, Getty Images

---

Sugar is so toxic it should be controlled like alcohol, according to new report that goes so far as to suggest setting an age limit of 17 years to buy soda pop.

It points to sugar as a culprit behind many of the world's major killers — heart disease, cancer and diabetes — that are now a greater health burden than infectious disease.

A little sugar "is not a problem, but a lot kills — slowly," says the report to be published Thursday in *Nature*, a top research journal.

Over the eons sugar was available to our ancestors as fruit for only a few months a year at harvest time, or as honey "which was guarded by bees," says the report by Dr. Robert Lustig, a noted childhood obesity expert at the University of California, and two U.S. colleagues specializing in health policy.

Now it is added to "nearly all processed foods." In developing countries, sugary soft drinks are often cheaper than potable water or milk, they say, noting that over the past 50 years, consumption of sugar

has tripled worldwide.

The sweetener is made from sucrose, found in sugarcane and sugar beets or from high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), and contains a roughly equal mixture of glucose and fructose.

A growing body of scientific evidence shows that the fructose "can trigger processes that lead to liver toxicity and a host of other chronic diseases," Lustig and his colleagues say.

"If international bodies are truly concerned about public health, they must consider limiting fructose — and its main delivery vehicles, the added sugars HFCS and sucrose — which pose dangers to individuals and to society as a whole," they say.

"We recognize that societal intervention to reduce the supply and demand for sugar faces an uphill political battle against a powerful sugar lobby," the researchers say, "and will require active engagement from all stakeholders."

But such "tectonic shifts" in policy are possible, they say, pointing to bans on public smoking, limits on alcohol sales and condom dispensers in public washrooms. "It's time to turn our attention to sugar."

Many schools have removed pop and candy from vending machines, but "often replaced them with juice and sports drinks, which also contain added sugar," the report says.

Canada and some other countries have also imposed small taxes on some sweetened food, but the researchers say it would take a big price hike to affect consumption.

"Statistical modelling suggests that the price would have to double to significantly reduce soda consumption — so a \$1 can (of pop) should cost \$2," they say.

The report suggests governments introduce zoning rules to control the number of fast-food outlets and convenience stores in low-income communities and around schools.

"Another option would be to limit sales during school operation, or to designate an age limit (such as 17) for the purchase of drinks with added sugar, particularly soda."

Parents in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania recently lined up outside convenience stores and blocked children from entering them after school. "Why couldn't a public-health directive do the same?" says the report.

The notion of putting a 17-year-old age limit on pop is a non-starter with the Canadian Beverage Association, representing makers of pop and most non-alcoholic drinks sold across Canada. The industry sells about \$5 billion worth of product in Canada each year.

"No," the association would not support putting a 17-year-old age limit on pop, said Stephanie Baxter, the association's communications director, who chuckled when told of the Lustig's age-limit suggestion.

Baxter was quick to dismiss the report in *Nature* as an "over simplification" of a complex issue.

"No one single food or beverage can be linked to obesity," she said. "And there is no scientific evidence to support the allegations that sugar, in any of its various forms, is a unique cause of health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease or metabolic syndrome."

She also said there is "no evidence that taxing or restricting access to sugar-sweetened beverages would have any meaningful impact."

Lustig and his colleagues say the U.S. Food and Drug Administration could "set the table" for change by limiting the amount of sugar that can be added to food.

Ultimately, Lustig's report says, food producers and distributors must reduce the amount of sugar added to foods. "But sugar is cheap, sugar tastes good and sugar sells, so companies have little incentive to change."

[mmunro\(at\)postmedia.com](mailto:mmunro@postmedia.com)

[Twitter.com/margaretmunro](https://twitter.com/margaretmunro)

© Copyright (c) Postmedia News