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# Should there be a **fat tax** on **food**?

**YES** Taxing unhealthy food is an excellent way of encouraging people to consume less of it. One great example is the high amount of value added tax (VAT) on tobacco, which increases the price so people are forced to think about cutting down or giving up. So a tax on fatty food, otherwise known as a 'fat tax', could make sense.

We need to do something to reduce our rocketing rates of obesity. The Medical Research Council has warned that around half of all adults in the UK are overweight and one in five is obese. This can lead to serious health problems, including heart disease, cancer and diabetes. And the cost to society is enormous – the Department of

Health says 18 million working days are lost every year due to obesity-related illnesses, and treating obesity is costly for the NHS.

Scientists from the Universities of Oxford and Nottingham have suggested increasing the price of fatty, sugary and salty foods by 17.5 per cent. So, for example, the cost of a packet of crisps would rise from 40p to 47p. The researchers predict that this increase on unhealthy foods could prevent more than 3000 deaths every year in the UK.

Dr Mike Rayner, who worked on the study, says while a fat tax wouldn't totally eliminate obesity, it could act as a tool towards achieving that goal. He also recommends that the money generated by the fat tax should go towards making the cost of

healthier foods such as fruit, vegetables, cereals and wholegrains cheaper.

Dr Colin Waime, chairman of the National Obesity Forum, is also in favour of a fat tax. 'It takes a lot of political will to stand up to the powerful food manufacturers, but the health of the population needs to be more of a concern for the government,' he says. 'Parents are feeding their children unhealthy sugary and fatty foods, and the great shame is that it is cheaper for them to do that. I believe a fat tax, combined with a subsidy on healthy food, would eventually change the nation's eating habits.'

**NO** The idea of a fat tax first cropped up in America in the mid-1980s amid growing concern over the nation's escalating obesity. But despite the fact that some US states have experimented with taxing junk food, obesity levels are continuing to rise all over the country.

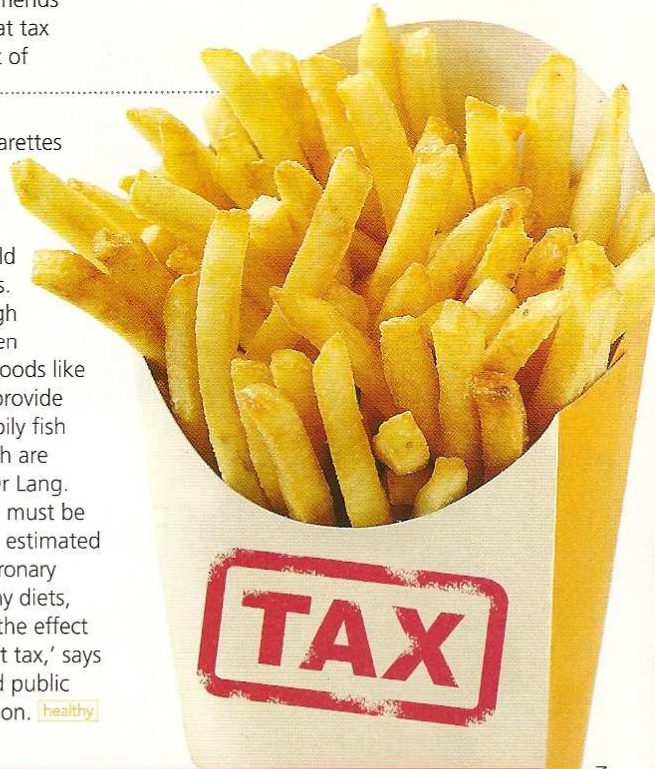
'A fat tax is patronising as it implies people can't think for themselves and can be taxed into losing weight,' says Dr Beckie Lang, external affairs officer of the Association for the Study of Obesity. 'All that would happen is that those on low incomes would be poorer – it's not that easy to change people's habits.'

Dr Lang believes the government should forget about a fat tax and instead put money into health education. 'The hard-hitting health education campaigns about smoking proved to be the most effective way to persuade people to cut down or give up,

whereas increasing the price of cigarettes just meant they either switched to lower-priced types or started to roll their own,' she says.

Deciding which fatty foods should be taxed could also cause problems. 'Both olive oil and avocados are high in fat, but should they be taxed even though their fat is "healthy" fat? Foods like these are high in calories but also provide important nutrients. For example, oily fish contains omega-3 fatty acids, which are important for good health,' adds Dr Lang.

Others argue that more research must be done into the idea of fat taxes. 'It's estimated that 30 per cent of deaths from coronary heart disease are caused by unhealthy diets, but further evidence is needed on the effect of taxes before we can support a fat tax,' says Maura Gillespie, head of policy and public affairs at the British Heart Foundation. healthy



**healthy SAYS...**

Bringing in a fat tax to encourage people to eat more healthily is a great idea in theory, but there is no solid evidence that it would work. Making healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables cheaper for people on low incomes along with health education campaigns (including reading magazines like *healthy!*) might be more effective in changing our eating habits in the long term.

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PHOTOGRAPH CORBIS