

Press release: Wednesday 20th March 2013.

IHF says fiscal measures are an important policy tool in preventing CVD and Obesity

10% tax on sugar sweetened drinks could reduce obesity and overweight numbers by 14,000

Today (20 March) the Irish Heart Foundation national charity fighting heart disease and stroke again urged the Government to implement a tax on Sugar Sweetened Drinks (SSDs) as a key tool in tackling rising levels of obesity here.

The latest plea followed the results of a health impact assessment (HIA) commissioned by Minister for Health Dr James Reilly, T.D., which was presented at the Irish Heart Foundation Euroheart seminar in Dublin and found that a 10% tax on sugar sweetened drinks had the potential to reduce the number of people who would become obese or overweight in Ireland by 14,000.

Mr Barry Dempsey, Chief Executive of the Irish Heart Foundation said the results of the health impact assessment confirmed it is time for our Government to get serious about tackling the problem of obesity in this country. He said: "Obesity is a major public health burden costing the state €1.1bn a year and it is putting children and adults at greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease, the number one cause of death here. Ireland is facing a grim prospect that if we continue to ignore policies to tackle obesity, we will start to see a reversal in the reductions in mortality from CVD achieved over the last 50 years.

"Sugar sweetened drinks have little or no nutritional value and they are packed with calories. The introduction of a tax to drive down consumption of these beverages seems like a no-brainer to protect our children."

As part of the health impact assessment (HIA) renowned international expert **Dr Mike Rayner**, Director, British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group Department of Public Health, University of Oxford, was invited to model the effects in Ireland of a 10% tax on sugar sweetened drinks (SSDs) on obesity and overweight. Dr Rayner estimated that a 10% tax on sugar sweetened beverages could potentially lead to a 1.25% reduction in obesity, which would reduce the number of obese adults by around 10,000 in Ireland and the total number of adults who are overweight, including obese, by 14,000. The effects on calorie intake and therefore on overweight and obesity would be greatest in younger age-groups and regular drinkers of sugar sweetened beverages.

Meanwhile main author of the HIA report **Dr Noelle Cotter**, Institute of Public Health in Ireland, added that per capita Ireland is consuming 83 litres of sugary fizzy drinks a year,

with teenage boys as the country's biggest consumers. The report portrayed a shocking picture of Ireland's young children with 15% of two- to four-year-olds regarded as overweight and 3% obese. For adults, more than 1 in 3 is overweight and 1 in 4 is obese. The report highlighted while solutions to the problem of overweight and obesity are not simple, the food environment can certainly form an integral part of addressing this issue.

International speaker **Professor Jørgen Dejgård Jensen**, associate professor at the Institute of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen, shared the Danish experience which saw a reversal of their government's decision and the abolishment of a fat tax. Professor Jensen said that lessons can be learnt from taxation policy in other jurisdictions. He said: "It is important that a health-motivated tax is transparent and that the potential health benefits can be understood and recognized by the consumers and other stakeholders. It is also important that administrative burdens to the industries are kept at a level that can be coped with."

Presenting on the recent report by the EHN (European Heart Network) on Diet, Physical Activity and CVD Prevention* Dr Mike Rayner concluded: "The policy response to diet and inactivity-related ill-health needs to come *predominantly* from making changes to the environment – in terms of the food supply and other factors which influence what people eat and how physically active they are".

The EHN's report presents a raft of different areas for policy action, including:

- Reformulation of food products to reduce the salt, saturated fat and added sugar content of foods and portion size;
- controlling advertising of unhealthy foods aimed at children;
- economic tools (taxes and subsidies) and pricing strategies to make healthier foods more affordable and appealing,
- and to make less healthy foods more expensive.

The Euroheart seminar hosted by the Irish Heart Foundation arises from the European Heart Health Strategy II project which has received co-funding from the European Union, in the framework of the Health Programme. Sole responsibility for this seminar lies with the Irish Heart Foundation; the Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

ENDS

* <http://www.ehnheart.org/publications/publications.html>

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