

# Junk food taxes

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Do you know the real reasons behind the terrible eating practices amongst Caribbean people today? Large numbers of people gravitate to what is commonly called “junk” or “fast” food. I reckon no one stops to think about the dangers the over consumption of junk food does to our body. The duty of ensuring a healthy life, and by extension healthy food for citizens, is the government’s job in the first place then the citizens themselves. This is so because the government has control over the marketing of goods in a country and is able to tax whatever they want and so discourage the consumption of that which is considered bade or unhealthy. Placing higher taxes on junk food within Caribbean countries will prove beneficial as it would help in reducing the accessibility of junk food to consumers, improve the country’s economy and help improve the health status of individuals. Placing higher taxes on junk foods and making healthy food more affordable will aid in reducing the purchase and over consumption of food with little or no nutritional value. Junk food is convenient because it is easy and cheap to get; making it more expensive will encourage other foods to be eaten. One of the reasons people do not choose healthier foods today is because of money, another is of convenience. If taxes are placed on junk foods to make them more expensive, then people will be driven to seek out healthier foods as they are less expensive. When Washington researchers compared the prices of 370 foods sold around the world, calorie for calorie, junk foods not only cost less than fruits and vegetables, but junk food prices also are less likely to rise as a result of inflation.(Pope, 2007). This research has led us to realize that not only can the people not afford to eat healthy but sooner or later will end up with any number of diet- related ailments because of the

growing increase in the consumption of unhealthy foods. Taxing junk food and similar food products would create additional incentive for consumers to eat healthier. A study conducted in Guyana states that it's easier for low-income people to sustain themselves on junk food rather than fruits and vegetables (Drewnowski, 2007). One of the disadvantages of being poor is that you can only survive on what you can afford and that is the problem faced by many people today, not only in the Caribbean but the world at large. Many healthy food items are so expensive today that poor or low-income families have to bypass them and turn to the cheaper, detrimental goods. Junk food items tend to be easily accessible and require little or no preparation before eating, making them highly preferable over healthy diets. Increasing taxes would make the prices of junk food expensive thereby reducing the appeal they have on consumers. Countries that impose a tax on junk food can strengthen and grow their economy vastly as it limits the amount of money being spent unnecessarily. The consumption of unhealthy foods puts a heavy cost on society as it contributes to many serious health problems (which have to be treated, sometimes for prolonged periods) so taxing junk food would make people pay social cost of eating unhealthy food. For example, eating unhealthy foods contributes to the problem of obesity. Obesity is estimated to cost the Caribbean's economy around 6.6 – 7.4 billion a year (Blackwell, 2009). Placing an increased tax on junk food will help the government raise substantial sums of money. They could use this revenue to offset other expenses. That money could be used to subsidize the purchase of staple foods like seasonal greens, vegetables, whole grains, dried legumes and fruit (Pettinger, 2012). A 20 percent increase in the price

of junk food nationally could result in about a 20 percent decrease in consumption, which in the next decade could prevent 1.5 million individuals from becoming obese and 400,000 cases of diabetes, saving about \$30 billion. (Bittman, 2011). The consumption of junk foods deteriorates the human body so placing higher taxes on junk food will help to increase the health status of individuals. One of the disadvantages of junk food is that it leads people to get overweight over time since junk food contains little nutritional value, but contains empty calories, and a high level of saturated fat, salt, or sugar. The stomach often has problems digesting junk food, which leads to health problems. In addition to that, the availability of junk food results in people eating junk food weekly or daily, and doing so increases their health risks. 300,000 people a year die from obesity-related health conditions including heart disease, diabetes and stroke all as a result of the over consumption of junk foods (McCuen, 2000). Because junk foods have high fat, cholesterol and salt content, doctors have established that the intake of too much junk damages the liver and the pancreas, resulting in insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (Lee, 2007). Healthy lifestyle choices help people remain physically well and too much junk food leads to complications as it prohibits the brain from working properly, leading to underachievement and a host of other disorders. Critics may argue that what we eat is a personal choice and that it is no one's business what a person chooses to eat. The freedom to eat a slice of apple pie might not sound quite as stirring as freedom of speech, but the ability to choose how to live our lives is the most fundamental freedom. What you eat is no one's business but ours (Morris, 2012). They may also argue that the government has no

right to punish people by taxing their food choices as it is quite difficult to know for sure which food to tax to prevent complications in the human body. They may also argue that many foods can lead to an unhealthy lifestyle if consumed in sufficient quantities. Because of the convenience of junk food, people will continue to purchase it no matter how much tax is placed on them. People who work have short hour breaks and they want to get something to eat fast. They see eating junk food as the fastest way to eat (Cummins, 2012). The critics may have a valid point but it can be also be argued that the choices made by individuals who eat junk food often end up costing a nation when they have to be treated over long periods of time for illnesses that result from their eating habits. Caribbean people, especially Jamaicans have many low income families who will have to buy what they can afford and tend to buy what is more economical. They also will take every opportunity to economize on food and use the rest to invest in other areas of their lives. So, if government implements higher taxes on junk food, it should result in changes in eating habits which notonly benefits the individual's health and social wellbeing but also the country's economy.