

Britain's "sugar tax" tackles obesity

Britons love sugary drinks. In 2015, they quaffed 14.8 billion litres of pop, or 232.9 litres each. By comparison, [Canadians drank](#) an estimated 70 litres each in 2015. But that consumption may soon be curbed by a newly introduced "sugar tax" on sweetened drinks.

Dr. Simon Capewell [told CMAJ last fall](#) he was optimistic that British Prime Minister David Cameron would end up supporting the sugar tax despite [his public reluctance](#) to do so. "It's a matter of when, not if. It's going to happen," said Capewell, vice president of health policy at the UK Faculty of Public Health.

He proved to be right: British Chancellor of the Exchequer (the equivalent of Canada's finance minister) George Osborne announced the tax in the 2016 budget on Mar. 16.

"I am not prepared to look back at my time here in this parliament doing this job, and say to my children's generation, 'I'm sorry, we knew there was a problem with sugary drinks, we knew it caused disease, but we ducked the difficult decisions and we did nothing'," Osborne told the British House of Commons in his [yearly budget speech](#).

Under the new rules, which won't take effect until April 2018, sugar-sweetened drinks containing more than 5 grams of sugar per 100 millilitres will be taxed 18 pence per litre (34 cents). The tax will rise to 24 pence per litre (45 cents) for drinks with more than 8 grams of sugar per 100 millilitres. The lower rate would apply to drinks such as Dr. Pepper or Sprite, while the higher rate would apply to drinks like Coke or Pepsi. Pure fruit juices and milk-based beverages will be excluded from the tax.

"We're obviously really happy about [the tax]," said Jennifer Rosborough,



Savany/istock

Britain's new tax of about 34 cents per 100 millilitres of pop will come into effect in 2018.

a nutritionist and campaign manager at Action on Sugar, a charity concerned with sugar's effect on health. She notes that the two-year window before the tax is introduced will give manufacturers time to adjust and reduce the sugar content in their beverages, a move that will help Britons reduce their sugar intake.

Some groups are now [lobbying for the tax to be extended](#) to other sugar-laden products.

The new tax puts the UK in step with countries like France, Finland, Mexico and Hungary that have also introduced a tax on sugar-sweetened drinks.

Obesity costs the UK's National Health Service [£5.1 billion annually](#) (\$9.5 billion).

"Reductions in sugar consumption will directly translate into a lower

incidence of type 2 diabetes, heart attacks, strokes and common cancers," argues Capewell.

In addition to potential savings in health care costs, the UK's tax could raise [£520 million per year](#) (\$972 million) which its government is expected to use to support health promotion activities like school sports.

The food and drink industry, which not surprisingly opposed the tax, continues to dispute the growing evidence suggesting that the tax will help reduce obesity. Health campaigners disagree, pointing to the strength of the scientific evidence outlined in [Public Health England's initial report](#) on sugar consumption in October 2015. — Michael Colborne, Edmonton, Alta.

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