

Healthy food environments

By Genoveva Islas-Hooker, Fresno
(Fresno Bee, September 22, 2009)

Thank you for calling attention to the alarming rates of obesity in the Valley ["Valley soda consumption high," story Sept. 17].

Your coverage highlights the unhealthy food environments that have resulted from poor food policies. It's not difficult to understand why so much soda is consumed when it's so cheap and so easy to get.

Excess calories from soda consumption contribute to obesity, and we need to collectively address such factors by creating healthier food environments. Healthy communities are places where healthy diets are encouraged. However, many local community members lack access to healthy food and potable water.

One way to fight obesity is by making healthy food and beverage choices easily accessible. We can do this by supporting farmers markets, community gardens and by corner stores selling more fruits and vegetables. We also need to make sure that access to drinking water is greater and more affordable than soda.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program at California State University, Fresno supports community efforts to create healthy food and physical activity environments. Join us.

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Original Article

"Valley soda consumption high, research finds:
Residents drink more, and weigh more, than other Californians"
By Eddie Jimenez
(The Fresno Bee, September 16, 2009)

Consumers need to be educated about the dangers of drinking too much sugary soda, officials said.

"Part of the problem is we drink soda like it's water," said Susan Babey, research scientist for the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

But unlike water, a 20-ounce bottle of soda contains 17 teaspoons of sugar, she said. A 20-ounce bottle of Pepsi, for example, contains 250 calories.

People have come to believe that consuming a 32-ounce soda is OK, said Dr. Michael MacLean, Kings County health officer. MacLean said that was unthinkable when he was a child.

"There is no way my mother would have let me drink that 32-ounce soda," said MacLean, who is 64. Sodas were for special occasions, he said.

Today it's common to drink a soda at home, in a restaurant or from a vending machine, but that habit needs to be curbed, Goldstein said.

"We can't afford to raise another generation who drink soda as a staple," he said.

Researchers said one startling finding in the study was that 41% of children ages 2 to 11 statewide drink one or more sugary sodas each day. By contrast, 57% of children in Kings County and 53% in Fresno County drink sodas. The state's leader was Imperial County, where 61% of kids drink sodas.

Parents need to be role models for their children and consume less soda, and they also need to limit their children's soda intake, Goldstein said. Otherwise, children who drink sodas regularly will be more likely to experience serious health problems, he said.

Unless the obesity epidemic is solved, one-third of children born in 2000 are expected to develop diabetes some time in their lives, Goldstein said.

The consequences of obesity and related diseases could be dire, said Reyna Villalobos, who is also with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.

"This is the first generation of children that will not outlive their parents," she said.

If education fails to discourage soda drinking, an extra sales tax might. A group of nutrition and economics experts are pushing for a federal tax of 1 cent on every ounce of sodas and other sweetened beverages.

The experts' plan was released by the influential New England Journal of Medicine in a health policy article by Arkansas' surgeon general, New York City's health commissioner and five national experts on health and economics.

A soda tax would generate tax revenue while discouraging people from consuming extra calories, the authors contend. They argue that a steeper soda tax would borrow the same strategy that helped drive down cigarette smoking while bolstering government revenues.

Taxes on soda aren't new -- 33 states charge sales tax on soft drinks. But generally they are fairly small, with the average soda tax rate being 5.2%. On a 12-ounce can of soda that costs \$1, that translates to about 5 cents.

The latest proposal calls for a 1-cent-per-ounce sales tax, an amount more than double the average state tax. It would increase the levy on that \$1 soda can to 12 cents.