

Advocacy for Prevention-Oriented Health Taxes to Fund Health Care Reform

Sample Questions for Legislators at Town Hall Meetings, Public Hearings, or Policy Speeches

1. The medical costs of obesity have recently been estimated at \$147 per year, and the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is one of the principal drivers of increases in those costs. Two thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese. Obesity and overweight increase risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis and other serious and costly chronic illnesses. Would you support a tax on caloric sodas and soft drinks to help pay for some of those costs, invest in prevention programs to reduce soda consumption, especially among children; or to reduce consumption by increasing soda prices?
2. Since 1991, when taxes on alcoholic beverages were last raised, inflation has eroded the tax rates by more than 40 per cent, effectively cutting those taxes by that much. Would you favor restoring the historical value of alcohol taxes and indexing the taxes for future inflation to avoid constant tax erosion?
3. Both the Congressional Budget Office report on revenue options and the Senate Finance Committee Options Paper on funding health care reform include proposals to increase taxes on alcoholic beverages and impose taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. For Representatives: Why have those options been ignored in the House health care reform bill (HR 3200)? For Senators: Are those options receiving any attention in ongoing discussions among members of the Senate Finance Committee? Why not?
4. One of the important elements of the health care reform proposals before Congress concerns an emphasis on prevention and wellness programs to help people lead healthier lives and reduce the costs of treating unnecessary illnesses. Higher taxes – and prices – on alcohol and significant taxes on soft drinks would help reduce consumption and the health and other harms associated with those products. What are the chief obstacles to getting those taxes included in health care reform?
5. Funding health care reform and avoiding deficit spending in the health care reform bill have been much discussed. Alcohol and soda taxes could make significant contributions to the revenues needed to expand health coverage. A penny per ounce soft-drink tax would yield some \$160 billion over ten years, raising the liquor tax rate by 50% and adjusting the taxes on alcohol in beer and wine to that rate would bring in another \$110 billion. Together, those revenues could provide between one-quarter and one-third of the apparent total bill for health care reform (\$900 billion to \$1 trillion). Tax and price increases on alcohol and soft drinks would help reduce obesity and alcohol harm, while

likely avoiding billions in health care and other costs. Why are these proven, effective public policy measures being ignored?

6. Education and personal responsibility are certainly important aspects of reducing and preventing obesity, overweight, and excessive alcohol consumption. Would you support population-based policies as well, such as taxing sugar-sweetened soft drinks and raising taxes on alcoholic beverages; reducing the availability and promotion (particularly to young people) of those products; strengthening warnings on alcoholic beverages and requiring consistent alcohol and calorie serving information on labels of those products; and requiring warnings on sugar-sweetened beverages about potential weight gain, obesity and the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases?

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