[The Opinion Pages](http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html) | Contributing Op-Ed Writer

**Introducing the National Soda Tax** JULY 29, 2014 [](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/mark_bittman/index.html)

By [Mark Bittman](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/mark_bittman/index.html)

Get this: Rosa DeLauro, the brave and beloved 12-term congresswoman from New Haven, will be introducing a bill in the House of Representatives Wednesday that would require a national tax on sugar-sweetened beverages.

And it’s about time. You know the big picture, even if you’ve forgotten the details, so I’m going to spare you the stats about obesity and diabetes that have been reiterated here and elsewhere ad infinitum. (If you want a refresher course, see [this](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/sugary-drinks-fact-sheet/).) Suffice it to say that sugar-sweetened beverages are linked to obesity and diabetes, and that some form of control is needed. Many sugar-sweetened beverages contain more sugar per bottle than the American Heart Association’s recommended daily limit and the Department of Agriculture’s guidelines for sugar. (The Food and Drug Administration has not set standards for sugar consumption.)

The Obama administration made [a tiny bit of noise](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/president-obama-sin-tax-sodas-food-thought-gov-paterson-failed-proposal-article-1.384437) about a soda tax back in 2009, but quickly backed off and has been silent on the subject since. For the last few years, there have been numerous attempts to get a significant (I’d call 10 percent of the price meaningful) tax on soda and other sugary drinks in a variety of cities and states. Berkeley, San Francisco [and Illinois](http://taxfoundation.org/blog/new-soda-tax-proposed-illinois) all have current initiatives, and, [predicts Randy Shaw of the online daily BeyondChron](http://beyondchron.org/23-vote-doom-sf-soda-tax/), “Berkeley’s soda tax will pass.”

That’ll be forceful, because a well-crafted soda tax is likely to work to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, and therefore obesity, and therefore diabetes, and therefore health care costs, and to raise money for health education about the dangers of overconsumption of sugar.

But a national tax would be much tidier. Just eight months after it took effect, [Mexico’s soda tax is starting to show positive results](http://qz.com/239478/mexicos-completely-sensible-anti-soda-tax-is-working/) — consumption is down, at least — and we could expect a similar performance from DeLauro’s proposed bill. [The SWEET Act](http://bittman.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/29/the-sweet-act/) (as she’s calling it) would amend the I.R.S. code and charge a penny per teaspoon of sugar, high-fructose corn syrup or other caloric sweeteners — “to be paid by the manufacturer, producer or importer of such products.” This would mean roughly a dime per can of soda, closer to 20 cents for a 20-ounce bottle or most medium-size soft drinks at restaurants. (Remember 6.5-ounce Cokes? The 20-ounce standard in part explains the obesity crisis.)

And the tax revenue would go to the [Prevention and Public Health Fund](http://www.hhs.gov/open/recordsandreports/prevention/) established by the Affordable Care Act. Just how it would be used can’t be predicted, but DeLauro suggests a variety of smart measures, including subsidies for fruits and vegetables in schools and for SNAP (food stamp) recipients and anti-soda marketing campaigns.

By this point you may be thinking that both DeLauro and I are bats, because it almost goes without saying that this bill, in this Congress, has as much chance of passing as real gun control, which is to say precisely none. But corny as it may sound, these things take time, and you have to start somewhere: The first national health care act [was proposed in 1939](http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/5-02-13-history-of-health-reform.pdf), and the modern history of anti-tobacco legislation began in the 1960s. Both are now powerful realities.

“I’m not a Pollyanna,” DeLauro said to me earlier this week, and she thinks it’s time: “I’ve been looking at this issue for a while, and I wanted to get it right. We are in the midst of a dual epidemic of obesity and diabetes, we need to do something about it, and we can’t rely on industry to deal with this voluntarily.”

That’s for sure; if there were an affordable and harmless sugar substitute that met with widespread public approval, the industry would happily use it, but barring that they’re going to sell all the sugar-sweetened beverages they can persuade consumers to buy.

Which is why we need soda taxes, and why they’re precisely the kinds of public health measures the federal government should be actively pursuing. States’ rights are fine for some things, but why should the people of Illinois, for example, be measurably healthier than the people of neighboring Wisconsin, which is precisely what will happen a number of years from now if Illinois were to pass a soda tax?

DeLauro is the right person for this. She has a history when it comes to noble and seemingly ill-fated gestures. For example, she introduced a [bill requiring calorie counts on restaurant menus](http://www.shfwire.com/federal-bill-calls-nutrition-information-chain-restaurant-menus) more than 10 years ago and was then regarded, she says, as “the crazy aunt in the attic.” Yet a provision for menu labeling was included in the Affordable Care Act. (Sadly, [the F.D.A. and the administration are both heel-dragging](http://www.foodpolitics.com/tag/calorie-labeling/) on this.)

With coalition-building (the American Public Health Association and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, among others, are supporting the SWEET Act), education and continuing research and revelations about the damage wrought by high sugar consumption, we should see increased support for regulation of the marketing and sales of what’s sometimes called “liquid candy.”

But DeLauro deserves kudos for bringing this to the House floor now; it’s a major health issue that should wait no longer. When a generation passes, and people look back and ask, “What do we wish we had acted on more quickly?” there are three answers that come to my mind instantly: economic inequality, climate change and diet. The first may never be remedied; the second is the great global challenge of our time. The third — especially when it comes to limiting sugar consumption — is, no pun intended, a piece of cake. Let’s get it done.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/opinion/mark-bittman-introducing-the-national-soda-tax.html?_r=0> Note: there were 482 comments, which you can access on the main page