



## Study: ‘Meat Tax’ Could Save 220,000 Lives Annually

Grant Whittington

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Taxing red and processed meats could prevent more than 220,000 deaths globally each year while also saving \$40 billion in associated healthcare costs, according to a study released last week.

The study, inspired by the World Health Organization’s 2015 report labeling red and processed meat as “carcinogenic,” calculated optimal tax levels for the 149 world regions studied based on consumption, health costs and non-communicable disease mortality.

The WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer found that red meat—beef, veal, pork and lamb—is “probably carcinogenic to humans,” meaning that its research found positive, but not definitive, associations between meat consumption and developing cancer. The organization’s findings on processed meats—such as hot dogs, ham, sausages, corned beef, beef jerky and canned meats—are more damning; these meats were categorized as a Group 1 carcinogen, putting them in the same tier as tobacco and asbestos.

“It all raises the question: Maybe we should regulate red and processed meat similar to other carcinogens like tobacco or asbestos, or some of the other foods that have demonstrable negative health impacts and that are increasingly regulated, like sugary drinks,” Marco Springmann, leader of the study and senior researcher at the Oxford Martin Program on the Future of Food, told Fast Company.

The study, conducted by researchers from Oxford Martin and the International Food Policy Research Institute, found that taxing red meat lowers consumption and thereby decreases the number of deaths attributed to red meat.

To appropriately measure the impact on a country-to-country basis, the researchers instituted a Pigouvian tax, a tax used to offset the unintended negative consequences to society of an economic activity. In this case, the tax would generate enough revenue to cover the negative health effects associated with red meat consumption.

The suggested taxes on red and processed meats in high-income countries, where these meats are most popular, averaged 21.36 percent for red meat and 111.17 percent for processed meat. This carries a noteworthy difference on the market—a \$10 steak would bump to \$12.13, while a pack of hot dogs previously running \$3 would more than double to \$6.33.

The suggested tax on processed meats reaches as high as 185.41 percent in Sweden, where Swedes would enjoy the once \$3 pack of hot dogs for something closer to a ballpark rate of \$8.56.

While the tax increase is staggering, the study shows it would have the intended result of significantly lowering consumption rates while also leveling out the burden of associated health costs. The decrease in red meat consumption would also limit meat's extraordinary environmental footprint—the researchers estimate that the taxes would cut greenhouse gas emissions by close to 100 million metric tons.

“Nobody wants governments to tell people what they can and can't eat,” Springmann told CNBC. “However, our findings make it clear that the consumption of red and processed meat has a cost, not just to people's health and to the planet, but also to the healthcare systems and the economy.”

Despite the convincing evidence, governments would likely face a firestorm of opposition if they proposed a steep “meat tax.” Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute argues that while the tax may steer people away from red and processed meats, it does not guarantee consumers would replace the food with healthier options. He quoted a 1937 George Orwell book to articulate his point that poor families would likely not splurge for the more expensive and nutritious replacement: “The less money you have, the less inclined you are to spend it on wholesome food.... You want something ‘tasty.’”

Local governments are becoming increasingly familiar with the fight for taxes on food items and beverages, as a wave of American cities have recently campaigned for a sugary drink tax that increases the cost of soft drinks. Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco and Portland have all passed such taxes, and the results have been emblematic of what the researchers hope a meat tax would accomplish. According to a 2017 study, sales of sweetened beverages in Philadelphia, a city home to 1.5 million people, fell 57 percent after the city implemented a tax of 1.5 cents per ounce.

Worldwide, more than 30 countries have put taxes on sugary drinks.

Soda companies have taken notice. They supported a November ballot measure in Washington state that prevents cities and counties from passing new taxes on sugary drinks. The companies presented the initiative as a “Yes! To Affordable Groceries” campaign and claimed in ads that striking down the measure could make groceries unaffordable, especially to the elderly.

A similar campaign strategy failed in Oregon, where public health funding raised \$3.4 million to combat a comparable initiative.

A ballot measure for meat taxes would almost surely be met with millions of dollars from lobbyists and farmers representing the meatpacking industry. After all, the meat industry, as reported by Quartz, has had its finger on dietary guidelines in the United States for several decades.

With that in mind, the U.S. is not likely to see any large-scale meat tax implemented any time soon, but it would be interesting to see it introduced on a local level. Aside from balancing out associated healthcare costs and potentially saving lives, the meat tax could subsidize fruits and vegetables—and assist in weaning farmers away from producing red meat.