

## Health beat: Doctor has Rx to trim deficit and shape up

By: Maura Lerner - December 13, 2012

---

As a physician, Dr. Michael Joyner isn't involved in the budget talks in Washington.

But he has a suggestion for slashing \$650 billion from the federal deficit without raising income taxes or cutting entitlement programs.

Sin taxes.

Joyner, an anesthesiologist and fitness guru at the Mayo Clinic, is always preaching about healthy lifestyles. And he believes that sin taxes -- on tobacco, pop, alcohol and high-fat foods -- could help solve two of the nation's biggest problems: the deficit and soaring health care costs.

He's certainly not the first to make the argument. But in a commentary on his website, *Human Limits* ([drmichaeljoyner.com](http://drmichaeljoyner.com)), Joyner lays out the case succinctly, estimating the savings over a 10-year period based on studies at Yale, the Cato Institute and the Congressional Budget Office:

- \$80 billion: An extra 50-cent-a-package tax on cigarettes.
- \$200 billion: A tax of 1 cent per ounce on "sugary beverages."
- \$250 billion: A 30 percent tax on alcohol (the rate is now about 10 percent).
- \$120 billion: A tax on high-fat foods, based on research in Denmark. He notes that Denmark recently repealed its "fat tax" after a year because of complaints that it inflated food costs and endangered jobs.

There's a good argument that the savings would be even higher, Joyner says. "There is pretty good evidence that smoking rates, health problems associated with excessive drinking and perhaps even obesity rates might fall if these taxes were enacted," he wrote.

Some oppose sin taxes because they fall disproportionately on the poor, he notes. But the poor also have the most to gain if they help change behavior, he says.

He thinks sin taxes should be popular with liberals and conservatives because they promote health and personal responsibility at the same time.

But is it realistic politically? "I don't know," he said, "but it should be in the mix."