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## **Regulating Our Sugar Habit**

By **MARK BITTMAN**

When Ronda Storms, a Republican state senator in Florida, is accused of nanny-state-ism for her efforts on behalf of a sane diet, it's worth noting. When she introduced a bill to prevent people in Florida from spending food stamps on unhealthy items like candy, chips and soda, she broke ranks: few of her party have taken on Big Food. And as someone who has called for the defunding of an educational Planned Parenthood program and banning library book displays supporting Gay and Lesbian Pride Month, she is hardly in her party's left wing. Not surprisingly, she's faced criticism from every corner: Democrats think she's attacking poor people, and Republicans see Michelle Obama. Soon after Storms proposed the bill, she told me, "Coca-Cola and Kraft were in my office" hating it.

Yet she makes sense. "It's just bad public policy to allow unfettered access to all kinds of food," she told me over the phone. "Why should we cut all of these programs and continue to pay for people to use food stamps to buy potato chips, Oreos and Mountain Dew? The goal is to feed good food to hungry people."

To some, dictating what recipients of benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program can eat seems unfair. But when the program began in 1939 it aimed both to feed the unemployed and to aid farm recovery. Participants received \$1.50 in stamps for every cash dollar spent, 50 cents of which was designated for purchase of agricultural surplus. That's already a directive on spending, but perhaps more important is that nearly three-quarters of a century ago almost the only thing you could buy - with or without regulation - was real food. Since then Big Food has moved our diet in the wrong direction, and now we have a surplus of empty calories.

The argument for limiting the use of food stamps to actual food is consistent with established policy. They're already disallowed for tobacco, alcohol, vitamins, pet foods, household supplies and (with some exceptions) food meant to be eaten on premises. Payments have been based on the cost of a "nutritionally adequate diet."

Let me state the obvious: there is no nutritional need for foods with added sugar.

All of this is part of the bigger question: How do we regulate the consumption of dangerous foods? As a nation, we've accepted the need to limit the marketing and availability of tobacco and alcohol. The first is dangerous in any quantity, and the second

becomes dangerous when overconsumed.

And added sweeteners, experts increasingly argue, have more in common with these substances than with fruit. In a recent paper in *Nature*, Robert H. Lustig, Laura A. Schmidt and Claire D. Brindis remind us that for the first time, chronic diseases pose a greater health threat than infectious ones, and of the three main risk factors for chronic diseases - alcohol, tobacco and diet - two are regulated and one is not.

The authors specifically target "any sweetener containing the molecule fructose (which makes sugar sweet) that is added to food in processing" as the key problem in our current diet, and correlate the rise in consumption of sugar with a rise in disease, listing the many ways in which sugar's effects on the body are similar to those of alcohol. Their contention is that sugar is hardly "an empty calorie," but rather an actively harmful one: "Fructose can trigger processes that lead to liver toxicity and a host of other chronic metabolic diseases."

Added sugar is not the only dangerous food. But unlike animal products, for example, which we also overconsume, it has no benefits. Yet we down it at the rate of 150 pounds per person per year, and while scientists argue whether it is addictive in humans (it meets the criteria for addiction in animals), it is most certainly habit-forming. Lustig and his co-authors suggest that actions like imposing taxes on added sugar or establishing a minimum age for purchase of sodas (they mention 17 in their paper) would reduce consumption.

The question "Is this necessary?" is unavoidable. But as obesity and its consequences ravage our health care system, we struggle not only with our own diets but also with preventing our children from falling into the same traps. Last year a brigade of parents stood watch outside a corner store in North Philadelphia in an attempt to prevent their kids from buying junk food.

They've been called foot soldiers, but you might call them vigilantes. Vigilantism occurs when people believe the government isn't doing its job. We need the government on our side. It must acknowledge the dangers caused by the most unhealthy aspects of our diet and figure out how to help us cope with them, because this is the biggest public health challenge facing the developed world.

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