

Romania mulls over fast food tax

As the Romanian Government considers introducing a far-reaching fast food tax that covers both sweet and savoury snacks, experts warn of potential stumbling blocks. Ed Holt reports.

Nutritionists have warned that a pioneering tax on fast foods about to be introduced in Romania will not keep a lid on increasing obesity rates unless it is implemented properly.

They argue that the planned new levy—drawn up by the health ministry and to be submitted to parliament for approval this month—could send out a confusing message to consumers in its current form about which foods precisely are unhealthy. It could inadvertently lead to people eating less healthily, say experts.

Cristian Panaite, a nutritionist at the KiloStop Nutrition Clinic in Bucharest, tells *The Lancet*: “This tax could really help people lose weight and eat more healthily if it is made clear exactly what is fast food and considered less healthy.

“It must be a tax that really does tax [certain foods] so as to encourage people to eat more healthily, for instance, to consume more vegetables. People in Romania don’t care very much about what is good for them and what is not and this tax could be a good way of educating them to do so—but only if it is done properly.”

“But it will not be good if it is just a tax on certain types of fast foods or

outlets and ends up being just a way to raise money for the state and not a method of making people’s eating habits more healthy.”

The new tax on foods like hamburgers, chips, fizzy drinks, and other fast foods with high sugar and fat levels which has been proposed by the health ministry comes as the Balkan

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country battles rising obesity rates. The ministry says that half the country’s 22 million inhabitants are overweight, and obesity rates among children aged between 3 years and 9 years have doubled in the past 4 years to 3.5 %.

Adrian Streinu-Cercel, secretary of state for the health ministry, has said that Romanians “need to be re-educated on how to eat properly” to stop the incidence of obesity rising even further.

Following the fall of communism in 1989, fat and salt-laden fast food, especially from American chains, has become increasingly popular. Many Romanians who still remember the severe shortages of basic foods that they had to endure under the communist regime see eating fast food as a symbol of their freedom, and, albeit fairly limited, wealth as a nation.

Health experts agree that the tax, if approved, will be one of the most far-reaching of its kind in the world. They say that similar taxes in other nations have been mainly aimed at sweets and sugary drinks, but that Romania is unique in that it also targets savoury foods. In Europe, Norway has a tax on sugar and chocolate whereas Denmark

and Austria have tackled unhealthy eating habits by banning trans-fats. Commercials for fast food are also forbidden at certain times of the day in Britain, Norway, and Sweden.

But critics of the Romanian tax say that it will be ineffective in its current form because it only targets certain foods. The health ministry has announced that kebabs—one of Romania’s favourite foods—and pizza will be exempt from the levy and it has yet to say exactly which products will be eligible for the tax.

Food producers have previously claimed that Romanians eat unhealthily because they are poor and they argue that pushing up the cost of foods will only make the situation worse. Romania, where the average monthly wage is just over €350, is one of Europe’s poorest countries and Romanians spend almost half their income on food. WHO has also warned of the effect such a tax might have on poor people. Timothy Armstrong, coordinator at the WHO’s department for Health Promotion, tells *The Lancet*: “It is possible that taxes may unintentionally impact more greatly on vulnerable populations and evaluation of such a tax should take this into account.”

Nutritionists say that the only way for the tax to be effective is to make sure it is accompanied by a comprehensive nutritional health education scheme. They point out that a previous ban on sugar-laden drinks at schools only led to parents buying the drinks for their children from other sources outside school hours. “People need to be educated about healthy eating. Implementing this tax is one thing but people need to be educated about food as well”, says Panaite.

Ed Holt

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

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Fast food has become a popular in Romania since the fall of communism in 1989