The intake of sugar-sweetened beverages, which include soft drinks, fruit juices, fruit juice blends, coffee and tea with sugar added, dairy blend drinks, sports and energy drinks, has increased globally and South Africa is no exception. Regular, high-calorie carbonated soft drinks are considered the most frequently consumed of all sugar-sweetened beverage categories by volume per year in South Africa and this is rising annually.

A recent STOP-SA (Sow, Stop or Stem the Tide of Obesity in People of South Africa) longitudinal study, co-funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF), looked at the association of sugar–sweetened beverage intake and relative weight gain among South African adults living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

FINDINGS

According to the study:
- Adults living in poor communities consumed an average of ten servings of sugar-sweetened beverages in a week. This is equivalent to 10 x 330ml soft drinks per week;
- A high intake of sugar sweetened beverages predicted weight gain in individuals over a 4-5 year period;
- Weekly consumption rate of sugar-sweetened beverages among women was higher than in men.

The study also found that a significantly higher sugar-sweetened beverage intake in food insecure versus the food secure individuals suggests that consumption may play a contributing role in the association of obesity and food insecurity.

The findings of this research adds to previous studies which found high and rising consumption rates of sugar-sweetened beverages among South African adults, especially those living in poor communities.

Why the high consumption rate amongst poor communities?
The researchers highlight findings from other South African studies which suggest that:
- The changing environment, availability and cost of food, lifestyle habits, taste and convenience influenced dietary behaviours and intake of sugary products;
- The adverse impact of the prevailing food environment, increasing access to low-cost sugary beverages and drinks, and high cost of fruits, vegetables and grains; and
- The limited awareness of the health risk of soft drinks consumption among South Africans living in economically-disadvantaged communities.

The effect of overconsumption of sugar-sweetened beverages on the South African population may be potentially enormous considering its impact on the health of individuals and the health system.

What can be done?
The study suggests that comprehensive strategies in addition to a sugar tax are needed to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and improve the intake of fruits and vegetables to mitigate the health consequences and unforeseen impact on the poor, and the food insecure. Moreover, subsidising healthy foods (by reducing prices) has been found to be effective when coupled with other interventions in reducing unhealthy beverage consumption.