

Oh, SNAP!

The United States assists citizens who have very low or no income with food costs through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP is funded by public tax money and those that receive SNAP benefits are often targeted to be enrolled in Medicaid.¹ This enrollment means that their healthcare is also paid in part by public funds. People with SNAP benefits can purchase vegetables, meat, and grains among many other kinds of food, including items that are not nutritionally valuable such as soda and candy. SNAP beneficiaries can also purchase seeds or plants that will grow food for their household to consume. One cannot use SNAP benefits to purchase non-food items such as alcohol, vitamins, or soap.²

Some people have advocated reforming the SNAP program to prevent these funds from being used to purchase unhealthy food. One proposal, for instance, is to stop people from purchasing soda with their benefits. Soda is not a necessary part of a healthy diet and is linked to obesity.³ Obesity is a serious health issue in the United States and is linked to chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.⁴ Obesity has a number of causes including poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, and genetic dispositions. Advocates of this reform argue that lowering soda consumption would help fight obesity. Not only would this be better for SNAP beneficiaries, but this would also help to reduce overall Medicaid costs. Some assert that it is unfair to expect taxpayers to help those on public assistance pay for their unhealthy choices and then also pay for the added healthcare costs associated with those choices.

Those who oppose this restriction argue that the hyper-management of the food choices of people in need is inappropriately controlling. People receiving public assistance should be able to exercise their autonomy in their food choices. Besides, where should such limits end? If health is the ultimate aim of SNAP, we can imagine many other additional constraints. Evaluating each food product for nutritional value would open the door to costly evaluation of all foods in order to sort them into those that can and cannot be purchased with SNAP. Additionally, if obesity is not a problem for a particular beneficiary, then they should not be restricted from moderate enjoyment of soda or other unhealthy foods. A complete ban on soda would not allow these beneficiaries to purchase soda using SNAP.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Should the SNAP program ban the purchase of soda?
2. Do those who receive public assistance have a moral obligation to practice healthy behaviors? Why or why not?
3. Is a ban on soda in the SNAP program morally harmful to SNAP recipients?

¹ http://www.communitycatalyst.org/blog/enrolling-thousands-of-medicaid-beneficiaries-is-a-snap-pun-intended#_V5_VDLgrl2w

² <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligible-food-items>

³ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/sugary-drinks-fact-sheet/>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/effects/index.html>

