

## **Sacramento Bee**

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### **Battle of the bulk**

A major public and private effort is in the works in California to fight the rise in obesity and its economic costs.

By Jim Sanders -- Bee Capitol Bureau

Californians are fat - and getting fatter.

Dangerously, unhealthily, threateningly flabby, not just hold-the-mayo, walk-another-mile and buy-a-larger-pants-size chunky.

State residents have gained 180,000 tons during the past decade, nearly 11 pounds apiece, increasing the risk of health problems from diabetes to strokes, state records show.

Government can't ban cheeseburgers or candy bars, but behind the scenes it's planning a major campaign to keep excessive calories out of your mouth.

Groundwork is being laid for a multifaceted public and private effort that hopes to change attitudes about eating and fitness as dramatically as has occurred with smoking in years past.

"I think it's going to take longer to achieve a major public health shift," said Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch. "But I believe we're on the verge of starting that process seriously."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a former Mr. Universe, has vowed to help lead the fight, which if successful could score him political points nationwide as a champion of child nutrition and fitness.

Schwarzenegger is focusing initially on schools, pushing legislation to restrict soda and junk food, tighten physical education standards, and expand the number of California fruits and vegetables in campus cafeterias.

Schools are a relatively easy target because the proposed changes largely involve policy, not extensive manpower, so the governor can make a big splash with relatively little money.

Much tougher, experts say, will be persuading adults to change lifestyles when the cost of junk food is low, the number of couch potatoes is high, and the state's massive red ink makes expensive ad drives impossible.

But Dr. Richard Jackson, the state's public health officer, said public concern about obesity's health consequences is growing and change can occur from "lots of incremental things done in multiple arenas."

"I've seen an absolute tipping point in public awareness of the epidemic," Jackson said. "People laughed about it three or four years ago. No one's laughing now."

Legislation represents only one battle front, but lawmakers have chipped in numerous obesity-related proposals, including bills to:

- \* Hike cigarette taxes by \$1 per pack and use \$500 million of the revenue each year for obesity, nutrition, physical activity or related programs.
- \* Set standards for nutrition instruction in public schools.
- \* Ban soda sales in high schools, except for extracurricular activities.
- \* Require food served in public schools to meet nutrition standards, restrict portion sizes of food sold a la carte, and set calorie limits for items sold in campus vending machines.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said healthy lunches raise test scores.

"It's just critical to have well-nourished, well-conditioned students - you have fewer discipline problems, better attendance, and student achievement increases," he said.

Schwarzenegger is planning a summit conference at which researchers, business leaders and medical experts will try to develop a comprehensive plan to fight obesity, aides said.

Despite the state's fiscal woes, the governor has proposed to set aside \$6 million in next year's budget to launch a "bold new change of direction" in fighting obesity.

The money would boost Medi-Cal's obesity services and fund community grants to support healthier workplaces, schools and neighborhoods.

"It's not a lot of money, but at least it's a way to get going," Jackson said.

As an example of the kind of local project envisioned, Jackson cited creation of a rubberized trail and walking clubs in a largely minority Los Angeles community that suffers from serious obesity-related health problems.

Government can do plenty to affect family eating and fitness choices, but not every option may be affordable or politically palatable, experts say.

Possibilities include promoting smaller portion sizes, pushing for calorie labeling, expanding farmers markets, building bike lanes, taxing snacks, using zoning laws to discourage excessive junk-food outlets, publicizing obesity dangers and nudging health-insurance companies to provide rebates to Californians who maintain their weight.

"The good news is the same sorts of things that will help to reduce obesity are going to make our communities better places to live," said Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley.

Judith Stern, a professor of nutrition at UC Davis, is optimistic. But battle lines aren't as clear with obesity as with tobacco - raising taxes and filing lawsuits may not be practical, she said.

"You don't have to smoke, but you have to eat," she said. "And eating is pleasurable."

State statistics are frightening: More than half of adults are overweight. Childhood diabetes rates are rising. Three of every four students tested fail to meet physical fitness standards. Flab and inactivity will cost the state economy about \$28 billion this year.

Government can't change attitudes overnight, Jackson said.

"Whether we're on the cusp of something exciting, good and new will depend on what kind of energy is brought to bear by every sector in our society - the parents, the schools, the health insurance plans and industry," he said.

The California Endowment, a private health foundation, is helping on the fat-fighting front lines. It chose six communities last month to participate in a \$26 million campaign that teams community-based organizations, school districts and public health departments to change local fitness and eating habits.

One goal is to reduce the barrage of junk-food advertising aimed at children, perhaps by lobbying manufacturers to desist voluntarily or to pressure media outlets not to accept such ads.

"I think that's the next hot issue," said Harold Goldstein of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. "Parents are sick and tired of the advertising and food industries trying to convince their children to buy products that they, as parents, don't want them to consume."

Others say government has no right to spend public funds on private eating habits or to interfere with legal advertising.

"This is a personal thing - people eat what they want to eat," said Mendocino County District Attorney Norm Vroman, a member of the Libertarian Party.

Past legislation to crack down on high school soda and junk food typically has been sidetracked or watered down in response to industry pressure or to claims that school clubs need revenue from such sales.

Sen. Deborah Ortiz, a Sacramento Democrat who led a successful fight two years ago to bar soda from elementary and middle schools, said it's too soon to know how many of this year's obesity bills have merit or will pass the Legislature.

"But I think the Schwarzenegger administration coming in, being identified with fitness, certainly has given people a sense that they have an opportunity with him," she said. "And I believe we do."

Assemblyman Joe Canciamilla, D-Pittsburg, said restricting campus menus does nothing to help students make wise choices.

Veronica Campos, 15, who was munching on a lunch of two bags of chips at John F. Kennedy High School, agreed with Canciamilla.

"It should be up to the kids," she said, adding that she only occasionally eats a junk-food lunch and "I jog 20 minutes every day."