New taxes on food products hailed as a unique measure to combat worsening obesity rates have been welcomed by doctors in Hungary.

The new set of levies, approved by the Hungarian Parliament in July and due to come into effect from Sept 1, will apply to a range of pre-packaged foods containing high salt and sugar contents, including crisps, salted nuts, chocolates, sweets, biscuits, ice creams, and energy drinks.

The supporters of the new taxes have championed the levies as extensive and say that the charges will push people into eating more healthily. Andras Nagy, president of the board of the Hungarian National Heart Foundation, told The Lancet: “We are extremely pleased. We have long been strong advocates of a tax like this and are very optimistic that it will bring results.”

Hungary, like almost all European countries, is battling rising obesity rates. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development roughly one in two adults in Hungary is overweight or obese.

The government estimates the taxes will produce yearly revenues of about 20 billion Hungarian forints (€74 million) and Prime Minister Viktor Orban has pledged the money will be used to help finance the country’s heavily indebted health-care system. Justifying the tax, he told local media that “those who live unhealthily have to contribute more to support the health system”.

Food producers and other critics, though, have been quick to dismiss the taxes. They say they are discriminatory in that they target only certain products, will hurt local businesses, and people in some areas will start travelling to neighbouring countries to purchase cheaper products, robbing the state of the extra tax revenues it wants. They also argue that taxes on some foods affect poorer people disproportionately because foods judged healthier are often more expensive and out of reach of those on lower wages.

Nagy rejects such claims. He said: “This tax will not increase poverty as the foods that are being taxed are convenience foods and people can do without them.”

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But WHO has said the effects on consumers need to be assessed carefully before any taxes on foods are introduced. Timothy Armstrong, coordinator at WHO’s department for Health Promotion, told The Lancet: “The WHO recommends to member states that they should consider fiscal policies to promote health but that such policies should be evaluated to assess the risk of any unintentional effects of such policies on vulnerable populations.

“In general, the majority of studies which have looked at [fat] taxes have found them to be regressive from an equity perspective.”

Some taxes on specific foods have been introduced or proposed in other countries in the past. But they too have faced similar criticisms. Norway has a tax on sugar and chocolate whereas Denmark plans to introduce a tax on saturated fats later this year. Authorities in Finland, where there is already a tax on sugary products such as soft drinks, ice cream, and chocolate, are also now considering a tax on saturated fat.

A tax on unhealthy foods, which if it had been passed would have been the most far-reaching in the world and would have included fat-laden fast-food products, reached the stage of draft legislation in 2010 in neighbouring Romania. But it was dropped just before it went to parliament amid fierce opposition. Romania’s Food Industry Federation head Dragos Frumesu said at the time the move would cost 36 000 jobs and would not change Romanians’ eating habits. Ministers withdrew the draft legislation, admitting they feared the effects it could have on a population that spends most of its average wage of less than €300 a month on food.

The Hungarian tax is also facing another criticism—that the levies do not go far enough. Nagy says: “We would have liked to have seen the taxes also including fats and in some ways one could say that this does not go far enough.”

WHO also says that there are question marks over the effectiveness of taxes limited to a narrow range of products. It says studies and anecdotal reports have indicated that often people simply purchase a similar item that is not subject to tax, for example shifting from purchasing sugary carbonated beverages to sugared non-carbonated beverages.

Lygia Alexandrescu, a nutritionist working at the Natural Silhouette private health clinic in the Romanian capital Bucharest, told The Lancet that even if a vast range of unhealthy foods are taxed, eating habits are unlikely to change. She said: “If someone wants a particular product he or she will have it no matter what. The state needs to invest in educating families.

“There needs to be explanation and education on why it is not a smart choice, not just denying access to a certain type of product.”

Ed Holt