

AUSTRALIAN CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION ALLIANCE



Health information and warning labels on alcohol

Position Statement

Key messages and recommendations

- Alcohol consumption is a major cause of harm in Australia and is an important risk factor for a range of chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes and chronic kidney disease. It may also contribute to the development of other major chronic disease risk factors such as high blood pressure and obesity and overweight.
- Alcohol product labelling provides an opportunity to provide consumers with information on the safe use of alcohol and its potential harms at the point of sale or consumption, so they can make an informed decision about their alcohol consumption levels.
- ACDPA supports the National Preventative Health Taskforce recommendation for health advisory information be included on labelling of containers and packaging of all alcohol products to communicate key information that promotes safer consumption of alcohol. (4)
- ACDPA recommends the mandatory provision of the following information on alcohol labels:
 - A full list of ingredients and nutritional information, in accordance with Standard 1.2.8 of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand code,¹ including the energy content per container and per 100mls. This is particularly important in relation to overweight and obesity concerns.
 - Advice on the size of a standard serve of alcohol and consistent and uniform information about the estimated number of standard drinks per container using a clear, consistent logo across all products
 - Health advice and warning messages based on the 2009 NHMRC Alcohol Guidelines including: medical side effects of alcohol; risks during pregnancy; increased risk of physical violence; risks to safety when operating machinery, driving, swimming etc.; and social, health and injury problems. Different health warning messages should be rotated to maximise impact and awareness.
- Strict guidelines regarding the wording, format, legibility, size and placement of the health information and warning labels should apply to maximise impact, awareness and comprehension of the warning labels. Labels need to be tested with consumers to ensure they are understood, especially by people with low literacy or who speak languages other than English.
- Health information and warning labels should be complemented with signs, posters and other media at alcohol retail venues, especially in licensed premises where people are served drinks in glasses and are not exposed to product labels
- The introduction of health information and warning labels on alcohol should be part of a broader comprehensive alcohol control strategy in line with the recommendations of the National Preventative Health Taskforce.

Background

Alcohol use is a leading cause of health and social harms in Australia resulting from both short term episodes of intoxication and from long term, chronic use. Alcohol consumption, especially at high levels, can increase the risk of developing a range of chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic kidney disease. Alcohol is a cause of cancer and consumption at any level increases cancer risk. Alcohol consumption may also contribute to the development of other

major chronic disease risk factors such as high blood pressure and obesity and overweight.(2) An overview of the evidence concerning alcohol use and chronic disease risk is provided in the ACDPA Position Statement: *Alcohol and Chronic Disease Prevention*.

Given these harms, it is important that consumers have access to information on the safe use of alcohol and its potential harms so they can make an informed decision about their alcohol consumption levels.

The introduction of health information and warning labels on alcohol products has the potential to increase awareness of alcohol as a potentially harmful product and should be an important part of a comprehensive public health strategy to educate the community on safer alcohol consumption. Placing health information and warning labels on alcoholic drinks and containers targets the appropriate audience (the drinker) at the appropriate time, when purchasing and using the product.

Alcohol labelling in Australia and overseas

In Australia, Standard 2.71 of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Act 1991 “Labelling of Alcoholic Beverages and Food containing alcohol” stipulates that an alcohol label is to include alcohol by volume (expressed in mL/100g or % alcohol by volume) and the estimated number of standard drinks contained. (3) However the size and legibility of this information varies greatly between products. Also, the packaging of alcoholic beverages, unlike that of non-alcoholic beverages, is not required to display a list of ingredients or nutritional information, such as the amount of sugar, kilojoules or any preservatives contained in the drink.(4)

In 2009, the National Preventative Health Taskforce recommended health advisory information labelling on all containers and packaging of alcoholic beverages.(5)

In 2011 a review of food labelling law and policy recommended that warnings about the risks of alcohol consumption while pregnant be mandated on containers of alcoholic beverages and at the point of sale for unpackaged alcoholic beverages and that generic alcohol warning messages be placed on alcohol labels, but only as part of a multi-faceted campaign. It also recommended that the energy content of alcoholic beverages be displayed on their labels and that mixtures of alcohol and other beverages should comply with all general nutrition labelling requirements including mandatory nutrition information panels.

Internationally, a number of countries have introduced mandatory warnings on the labels of alcoholic beverage containers. In 1997 nine countries had some kind of mandated alcohol warning labels (6) and since then at least eight other countries, or jurisdictions within countries, have passed laws requiring some form of alcohol warning labels.(7)

The evidence around health information and warning labels on alcohol

The serious health and safety effects associated with alcohol are proven and well documented; however, in relation to the effects of alcohol labelling the available evidence has thus far been limited by the type of labelling initiatives which have been undertaken, and the lack of quality evaluations of those initiatives.

Evidence suggests warning labels can increase awareness of alcohol related harms to some degree (8). A study of the US warning labels showed that warning labels had an impact on cognitive or behavioural stages necessary for behavioural change, such as intention to change drinking patterns, having conversations about drinking and willingness to intervene with others who are seen as hazardous drinkers.(9) Given the relatively small size of labels, and the obscurity and lack of variation in the label content, the study noted that it was remarkable that any effects were demonstrated.(10)

A comprehensive review on the effects of alcohol warning labels concluded that the use of warning labels did actually raise awareness. (11) In their review of the efficacy of warning labels, which looked at the international evidence regarding efficacy in changing attitudes and behaviour, Wilkinson and Room (12) make the important observation that apart from any short-term effect, the

requirement to have a warning on a product regarding its safe use is a 'symbolic statement concerning the nature of that substance. (13) This can be important in helping to shift the culture of harmful alcohol consumption but it is difficult to measure such an impact in the short term.

Other studies have shown that warning labels have the potential to influence behaviour but this depends on the label design, the content of the messages, and how well they are targeted at their intended audience.(14)

The most compelling evidence regarding warning labels come from the tobacco labelling experience which shows that health information and warning labels can be effective not only in increasing information and changing attitudes, but also in changing behaviour. (15) A Canadian study found that nine months after the introduction of tobacco warning labels, 91 per cent of smokers recalled reading the labels and had a good knowledge of their content. (16) Smokers who recalled the labels reported stronger intentions to quit, while smokers who had read and discussed the labels were significantly more likely to have stopped smoking.(17)

The National Preventative Health Taskforce concludes that while there is as yet no evidence of warning labels in isolation influencing drinking behaviour, the experience from tobacco labelling suggests that warning labels can be effective if they:

- Are graphic and attention-getting
- Occupy a considerable portion of the package surface, eg at least 25%of the physical space
- Involve rotating and changing messages
- Are complemented by a wide range of strategies aimed at changing alcohol consumption behaviour.(4)

Achieving behavioural change is a complex process and health information and warning labels need to be just one part of a multi-strategic approach to informing people about the harms of alcohol. Health information and warning labels can assist to reinforce and complement messages, information and education delivered through other strategies such as media campaigns, school and community education programs and websites. This is especially the case if the health advice is compatible and consistent with the broader health messages being delivered.

Implementation

The principle of alcohol health information and warning labels is popular with the public both internationally and in Australia.(18, 19) Support for labelling alcoholic containers, with information from the National Drinking Guidelines, has been strong and consistent. For example, more than two thirds of respondents in the past three National Drug Strategy Household Surveys (71.0% in 2001, 69.9% in 2004 (20) and 70.9% in 2007 (21) have supported the addition of health information labels on alcoholic products. In addition, a public opinion poll of Victorians found that 68% supported a law change requiring all alcohol products to carry health warnings and 13% said they would buy less alcohol if warnings were on products. (22)

Overall, the costs associated with implementation of warning labels are low. (23) Australian wine producers and manufacturers that export their alcohol products to the United States of America (USA) already label their products with a health warning to meet the requirements of the government of the USA. In addition, alcohol labels are often changed to support promotions or different types of one-off or limited marketing strategies.

Acknowledgment

This position statement is based on the Consumer Information and Labelling position statement developed by the Alcohol Policy Coalition.

Further information

Related ACPDA Position Statements available from www.cancer.org.au/acdpa

- *Alcohol and Chronic Disease Prevention*
- *Alcohol Pricing and Taxation*
- *Marketing and Promotion of Alcohol*
- *Alcohol Supply*

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