Alcohol, Drugs and Impairment Division – NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL

Position Statement

Alcoholic Beverage Labeling

Position

The Alcohol Drugs and Impairment Division (ADID) of the National Safety Council recommends clear effective labeling on alcoholic beverages to include both an accurate numerical alcohol content (alcohol percent by volume or ABV), the standard alcohol drink (SD) units per serving size or container, and safety pictograms to relay health related warnings to the consumer.

Addition of clear concise labeling of alcoholic beverages will inform the consumer of the amount of alcohol consumed with each drink. This information will help mitigate risks associated with alcohol impairment in safety sensitive activities, drinking alcohol during pregnancy and the long-term health effects of drinking alcohol.

Background

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 84.9% of adults reported they drank alcohol at some point in their lifetime.[1] In January 2025, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Surgeon General released a report titled *Alcohol and Cancer Risk*[2] describing the scientific evidence for the causal link between alcohol consumption and increased risk for at least seven different types of cancer.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction issued a report, *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health: Final Report* 2023 advising, "Research shows that no amount or kind of alcohol is good for your health. Drinking alcohol has negative consequences. The more alcohol you drink per week, the more the consequences add up."[3]

In the interest of public health, the U.S. Department of Agriculture published, *Dietary Guidelines for Americans,* 9th Ed. 2020 which recommends limiting alcoholic beverages (if consumed) to 2 drinks or less a day for men and 1 drink or less a day for women.[4]

The National Institutes of Health defines the term "standard drink" as 0.6 fluid ounces or 14 grams of ethanol per serving in their publication *What is a Standard Drink?*[5] The NIH publication illustrates several drinks and serving sizes of alcoholic beverages with varying ABV. These many variables make it easy to lose track of how much alcohol is consumed.

In 1987, the United Kingdom National Health Service introduced the idea of counting alcohol drink units to help people keep track of alcohol consumption.[6] In the UK system, the number of units in a drink is based upon the size of the drink and the concentration of alcohol (ABV). For instance, a

12 oz can of stout beer with a high ABV contains almost 2 drink units whereas the same can of a low ABV lager would contain 1 drink unit.

A pictogram is a graphical symbol used to convey ideas or concepts through visual resemblance to a physical object. They are often used as a warning or safety hazard message to a wide audience. Gold et al. (2021) reported in a randomized controlled trial "Labels with enhanced pictorial representations of alcohol content improved knowledge and understanding of the UK's low-risk drinking guidelines compared with industry-standard labels".[7]

Dimova et al. (2021) in a rapid literature review concluded, "Well-designed alcohol labels can positively influence consumers' attention, comprehension, recall, judgment and behavioural compliance. The findings have implications for alcohol labelling research and policy."[8] Clear labels which include the ABV and standard drink units in an alcoholic beverage help address public health and safety concerns by informing consumers of the risks posed by excessive drinking. Moreover, clear labels help address broader public health concerns, such as the risks of excessive drinking and its long-term health effects. Mandating detailed labels will uphold consumer rights, promote healthier lifestyles, and contribute to a more informed and responsible society.

Wettlaufer et al. (2018) reported in a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, "SDLs (standard drink labels) have the potential to increase awareness of SDs (standard drinks) and facilitate the monitoring of personal alcohol consumption in the context of a comprehensive alcohol strategy."[9]

Canadian researchers testing the efficacy of alcohol labels with SD information and Canada's Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines (LRDGs) by Hobin et al. (2018) summarized their work by writing, "Results indicate that the introduction of enhanced alcohol labels combining standard drink information and national drinking guidelines may be an effective way to improve drinkers' ability to accurately assess alcohol consumption and monitor intake relative to guidelines."[10]

References

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[3]https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2023-01/CCSA_Canadas_Guidance_on_Alcohol_and_Health_Final_Report_en.pdf
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