

Should alcohol carry a warning label?

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2023 February 6;195:E203-4. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.1096037

Posted on cmajnews.com on January 20, 2023

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption, according to updated guidelines from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA).

The guidelines recommend consuming no more than two alcoholic drinks per week. That's the equivalent of two bottles of beer, two glasses of wine, or two shots of spirits.

CCSA is also calling on Health Canada, which funded the guidelines, to require warning labels on all alcoholic beverages.

Changing consensus

"All levels of alcohol consumption are associated with some risk, so drinking less is better for everyone," the guidelines state.

Previously, CCSA suggested a maximum of 10 drinks per week for women and 15 per week for men — recommendations that form the basis of Health Canada's alcohol guidelines.

But the scientific consensus on the health impacts of alcohol has changed in the past decade, with studies showing that even small quantities can be harmful.

According to CCSA's review of more than 5000 studies, three to six standard drinks per week pose a moderate health risk, including an increased risk of cancer, while seven or more drinks pose increasingly higher risks, including for heart disease and stroke.

The lifetime risks associated with more than two drinks per week also increase more steeply for women than men due to a host of biological differences.

Low awareness of alcohol risks

Many people in Canada are unaware of these risks, according to CCSA. More than half of people over age 15 consume more than two drinks per week. Two in five are not aware alcohol is carcinogenic. And the notion that drinking in moderation

protects the heart is still widely publicized, despite systematic reviews debunking the claim.

CCSA and the Canadian Cancer Society argue the federal government should require warning labels on alcohol packaging to inform people about the cancer risk and how many standard drinks are in every container.

Consumers "have a right to clear and accessible information about the health and safety of the products they buy," according to CCSA.

The WHO has echoed the call for warning labels noting that alcohol has long been categorized as one of the highest-risk carcinogens alongside tobacco, asbestos and radiation.

Do alcohol warning labels work?

In one of the only real-world experiments of cancer warnings on alcoholic beverages, labels on products in Yukon liquor stores were found to decrease per capita alcohol sales by more than 6% compared to control sites.

We cannot talk about a so-called safe level of alcohol use. The only thing that we can say for sure is that the more you drink, the more harmful it is.

International debate

The guidelines have sparked debate internationally, with *BBC News* dubbing the guidelines as "drastic" compared to recommendations in other countries.

Australian and French guidance recommend a maximum of 10 drinks per week, while the United Kingdom suggests no more than 14 units or six standard drinks.

However, according to the World Health Organization, half of all alcohol-attributable cancers in Europe are caused by such "light" and "moderate" consumption.

"We cannot talk about a so-called safe level of alcohol use," said Carina Ferreira-Borges, regional advisor for alcohol and illicit drugs in WHO's European office. "The only thing that we can say for sure is that the more you drink, the more harmful it is."

"What we learned from that study was that the cancer labels grabbed consumer attention," study coauthor Erin Hobin told *CBC News*. "They read the cancer warning very closely. They thought about that message. They talked to their neighbours and friends about that message."

However, the study was cut short, likely owing to alcohol industry pressure.

Industry representatives have also questioned CCSA's methodology and called for an independent review of the updated guidelines.

According to CJ Hélie of Beer Canada, the alcohol industry already voluntarily informs people to drink responsibly, so there's no need for any labels.

For example, Wine Growers of Canada is developing a QR code that manufacturers

could use voluntarily to direct consumers to information about responsible drinking.

Duty to inform

Some experts argue that such initiatives don't go far enough to fulfill the industry's legal duty to inform consumers clearly about health risks, especially if those risks are not well known.

Health warnings "are not just critical, they are required under the law," and a manufacturer's obligation to inform is greater when a product is ingested, according to Jacob Shelley, co-director of the health ethics, law and policy lab at Western University.

In the case of tobacco, warning labels have been effective in attracting consumers' attention and increasing health knowledge, but their impact on behaviour can wear off over time and varies depending on the size and design of the warning.

Health Canada appears reluctant to weigh in on the issue. Although the agency acknowledged to the media that alcohol presents serious and complex public health and safety issues, it has declined to comment on requiring warning labels.

Lauren Vogel, CMAJ

Content licence: This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original publication is properly cited, the use is noncommercial (i.e., research or educational use), and no modifications or adaptations are made. See: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>