

What's not on the bottle? Public health organisations call on the European Commission to label alcoholic drinks

On the 10th September in the European Parliament (Brussels) public health experts will be calling the European Commission to make changes to alcohol labelling legislation and allow consumers to make truly informed choices.

Currently, when a consumer drinks alcohol it is highly unlikely that they know exactly what they are drinking, unless they are determined enough to search on the company's website.

In 2011 the European institutions passed legislation that requires food and soft drinks, including fruit juice and milk, to label nutritional information and ingredients. However, alcoholic beverages were exempted from this obligation.

The event will be hosted by Member of the European Parliament Glenis Willmott (S&D, UK), who comments: "We are letting consumers down by refusing them the chance to make an informed choice about the alcohol they buy. I want to ensure the new Parliament works together with the Commission to rectify this problem."

"As public health professionals search for effective policies to address alcohol related harm, labels stand out as an underutilised way to empower consumers to make healthy decisions about alcohol intake," said Dr Lars Møller from World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

"Why would a bottle of milk or fruit juice display ingredients and nutrition information but not a bottle of whisky or beer? We see no reason. Consumers have the right to know what they are drinking. Alcoholic beverages should not be treated differently from other drinks and food in general. If we are to help consumers choose what, when and how much to drink, labelling the full list of ingredients – including allergens, additives and preservatives – on alcoholic drinks is a must." according to Ilaria Passarani, Head of the Health and Food Department, BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation.

"It is really perplexing that European decision makers refused consumers their right to know what is in their drinks by excluding alcoholic drinks from this legislation. We are awaiting the European Commission report that it is obliged to produce on alcohol labelling by December this year. We call on the European Commission to bring alcohol packaging in line with non-alcoholic beverage packaging" said Mariann Skar, Secretary General, European Alcohol Policy Alliance.

The event looked at the rationale of alcohol labelling, the link between alcohol and healthy diet and recent developments in area of alcohol labelling.



Being high in sugar means alcohol contains a considerable number of calories, with energy content of 7.1 kilocalories per gram; only fat has higher energy value per gram (9kcal/g). Studies in the UK have shown that alcohol accounts for nearly 10% of the energy intake amongst adults who drink.¹

Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of fat the body burns for energy. While nutrients, protein, carbohydrates and fat can be stored in the body, alcohol cannot. As a result, the body prioritises removing it meaning that all other processes that should be taking place, including absorbing nutrients and burning fat, are interrupted.

Many people forget to include alcoholic drinks when watching what they eat, and so it is easy for energy from alcohol to add up quickly and unnoticed. Alcohol also acts an appetite stimulant and can lead to overeating at mealtimes and late at night.

The consumer has a right to make informed choices about the products they purchase, and it is the obligation of public institutions to enable them to exercise this right.

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EUROCARE (The European Alcohol Policy Alliance) is an alliance of non-governmental and public health organisations with around 57 member organisations across 25 European countries advocating the prevention and reduction of alcohol related harm in Europe. www.eurocare.org

¹ Bates B, Alison Lennox in Obesity and alcohol; an overview (2012) National Obesity Observatory, NHS