

Summary

- Alcohol labelling is a simple and effective way to communicate health information to the public and address the limited awareness of alcohol harms.
- There is currently no requirement for alcoholic drinks to display important health information such as the drinking guidelines, health warnings or calorie content.
- The alcohol industry has shown it cannot be trusted to provide this information voluntarily.
- Governments across the UK should mandate the provision of health information, such as drinking guidelines, health warnings, ingredients, and nutritional information on alcohol labels.

Limited awareness of alcohol harm

Alcohol consumption remains far too high in Scotland. The majority (80%) of adults drink alcohol and **one in five report drinking at hazardous or harmful levels**, defined as exceeding the UK Chief Medical Officers' weekly drinking guideline of 14 units per week.¹

Alcohol **causes over 200 diseases and conditions**,² and claims **over 50 lives each week** in Scotland.³ A large proportion of these deaths are from alcohol-related cancers; for example, **alcohol is responsible for 1 in 10 female breast cancers** and at least **2 in 5 male mouth and throat cancers**.⁴

Despite alcohol's significant health impact, **public awareness of alcohol harm is limited:**

78% don't know the **weekly drinking guidelines**⁵

1 in 2 don't know that **alcohol causes cancer**⁶

4 in 5 don't know how many **units** are in their drinks⁷

3 in 4 don't know the **calorie content** of drinks⁸

Alcohol labelling is simple and effective

Providing information via labels is a key way for people to access health information and advice at the point of purchase and consumption, helping to **address current low levels of knowledge of alcohol harm**. Improved labelling would help meet people's **need for information**.

Health warnings on **tobacco packaging** have been considered essential in informing consumers about the health effects of smoking.⁹ Tobacco packaging has been required to display a combined written and pictorial warning covering a range of smoking-related conditions, including cancer, in the UK since 2008.¹⁰ **Pictorial warnings on tobacco packaging have increased intentions to quit smoking, reduced cigarette consumption and reduced the likelihood of smoking uptake.**^{11 12}

Alcohol labelling research suggests that **presenting unit information alongside drinking guidelines would improve consumer understanding**.¹³ Evidence also indicates that nutrition labels can improve drinkers' ability to estimate the calorie content of alcoholic drinks, although evidence is inconsistent on their effect on consumption.¹⁴

Studies suggest that including **health warnings on alcohol labels would raise awareness of health risks** and may **encourage reduced consumption**.^{13 14} Specific warnings, such as for **cancer**, were found to be particularly effective.¹³ For example, a Canadian intervention found that prominent labels with drinking guidelines, a cancer warning, and unit information led to **increased awareness and knowledge of drinking guidelines**¹⁵ and **alcohol's role in causing cancer**,¹⁶ as well as a **6.3% reduction in consumption**.¹⁷

Failure of self-regulation

Alcohol labels across the UK are only required to display the strength of the product (% ABV) and whether the product contains any of the 14 common allergens. **There is no requirement to display drinking guidelines, health warnings, or ingredients and nutritional content.**

In stark contrast to the mandatory labelling requirements for all other food and drink products, which are independently regulated,¹⁸ alcoholic drinks labelling currently **relies on voluntary adherence to UK Government and industry guidance.**

This has resulted in **very little information being provided to consumers.** In June 2022, **more than a third (35%) of products in the UK failed to display current drinking guidelines** and **97% did not warn of the dangers to health** from drinking.¹⁹ **Only 5% of products displayed full nutritional information.**

It is not in the interests of industry to make health information easily accessible to consumers.²⁰ Industry guidance emphasises signposting to industry-funded websites instead of displaying the information on the packaging.²¹ Such websites have been shown to **misrepresent the evidence of the health harms of drinking,**^{22 23} and research has found that responsible drinking messages are **strategically ambiguous and ineffective.**^{24 25}

Public support of mandatory health information

- **81% of people in Scotland support clear alcohol product labelling,** including alcohol units, calories, low risk drinking guidelines and health information to help people understand the health effects of alcohol.²⁶
- **74% support warning labels** on alcoholic drinks about the health risks of alcohol consumption.²⁶
- **68% support clear nutritional information,** such as calories, on alcoholic drinks.²⁶

"They'll make it as small and unnoticeable as possible because, let's be honest, promoting the fact that you know you shouldn't be drinking this isn't going to sell bottles."

Focus Group Participant²⁶

This is supported by focus group research with young adult drinkers, which found that the **Scottish public don't trust alcohol manufacturers to include information voluntarily.**²⁷

Time to mandate alcohol labelling

Alcohol labelling should be subject to **statutory regulation** to protect and promote the public's rights to health and consumer protection, free from industry influence. The content and design of information should be specified, in line with World Health Organization recommendations.

Such an approach has recently been taken by **Ireland**, who legislated in 2018 to mandate alcohol labelling as part of its comprehensive Public Health (Alcohol) Bill. **Alcoholic drinks will be required from 2028 to display health, pregnancy and cancer warnings, and the product's alcohol and calorie content,** with the content and design of labels specified in regulations.

The Scottish Government is currently working alongside other UK nations to support **the UK Government's commitment to expand on the existing voluntary guidelines for alcohol labelling by introducing a mandatory requirement for alcoholic drinks to display consistent nutritional information and health warning messages,** as part of their 10-year Health Plan published in June 2025.²⁸

About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to reduce harm caused by alcohol. We do this by campaigning for effective action that works for people and reduces inequalities. We develop policies informed by academic research and the real-life experiences of people affected by alcohol and provide accurate and accessible information about alcohol to the media, policymakers, practitioners and the general public.

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- ⁵ Research for With You carried out online by Opinion Matters throughout 06.12.2024-09.12.2024 amongst a panel resulting in 2000 UK adults (18+) responding. <https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/latest/news-and-views/withyou-advice-regarding-alcohol-at-christmas>
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