

# Getting the facts right on

# Meaningful consumer information about alcohol

Health Warning Labels (HWL) began to gain popularity amongst policy makers in the US in the 1980s, when local and state legislation pushed for mandatory labelling in an effort to reduce alcohol-related harm. Warnings generally address targeted audiences or contexts: pregnancy, drink driving or operating machinery.

While they can raise awareness of specific hazardous behaviours, **Health Warning Labels** can **only achieve modest results**. They fail to induce behavioural change in drinking patterns, and therefore **fail to reduce alcohol-related harm**. Evidence proves that **more sophisticated educational programmes are a more appropriate and meaningful way** to provide adequate information about alcoholic beverages to consumers.

This document aims to provide an effective toolkit to address questions surrounding consumer information about alcohol (including, but not limited to, Alcohol Health Warnings)

## K E Y P O I N T S

### Health Warning Labels in the EU: Alleged merits & challenges

- Health Warning Labels (HWL) are advocated by some stakeholders in the alcohol and health debate as a means of reducing alcohol-related harm.
- The idea that a mere label will raise awareness, change behaviour of drinkers at risk and reduce alcohol-related harm is too simplistic: such complex issues require more sophisticated responses.

### Are Health Warning Labels effective in raising risk awareness?

- HWL only have a limited impact on raising and maintaining risk awareness and even carry a risk of unintended consequences.
- HWL are not a very cost-effective instrument in EU context, where levels of risk-awareness are already high.

### Are Health Warning Labels able to change behaviour?

- HWL cannot transform risk awareness into responsible consumption patterns: a warned consumer is not necessarily an informed one.
- Absence of positive messages or guidelines and lack of space and visibility are some of the reasons explaining the low effectiveness of HWL.

### Are there more effective ways to provide meaningful information?

- No stand-alone tool is sufficient to communicate complex messages about alcohol-related risks.
- The most successful awareness-raising campaigns are integrated, cross-media, positive, targeted and tailored, e.g. the UK's Drinkaware campaigns, which combine positive media communications (TV, print, internet) with messages on labels and advertisements for alcoholic beverages.

# HWL in the EU: Alleged merits and challenges

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## KEY POINTS

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## Rationale for HWL: reduce harm

Anti-alcohol advocates believe HWL can raise and maintain consumer risk awareness and provide adequate information for rational decision making. Some advocates argue HWL may also induce a change in behaviour of drinkers at risk and thus reduce alcohol-related harm.

However, alcohol consumption and misuse is much more complex: moderate consumption is fully compatible with a healthy lifestyle and risks vary greatly from individual to individual. The idea that a mere label will raise awareness, change behaviour of drinkers at risk and reduce alcohol-related harm is too simplistic in light of the complexity of the issue.

## Alcohol vs Tobacco

Any comparison with the warnings displayed on the packages of tobacco products – and their alleged effectiveness – simply ignores the widely acknowledged fact that while tobacco consumption is altogether negative, moderate alcohol consumption is fully compatible with a healthy lifestyle and should therefore not be treated in the same way. Any such comparison – from a public health and public policy perspective – is therefore wholly inappropriate.

## Some examples of HWL

In the UK, voluntary information is provided on labels, as part of the “Responsibility Deal”: units-based information, information on pregnancy, daily guidelines for men and women. In addition, producers may place a responsible drinking message and a link to the Drinkaware website (see p6),

providing more detailed information on what is responsible drinking. This approach combines a classic Health Warning Message with a series of responsible drinking information for consumers.



## HWL, RDM, MMC: what are we talking about?

**Health Warning Labels** (HWL), whether mandatory or provided voluntarily by producers, are placed on containers and packaging to remind consumers about the health risks associated with alcohol consumption in particular circumstances, e.g. drinking during pregnancy, drink driving, or operating machinery. They may include a **pictogramme** or contain information based on **units**.

**Responsible Drinking Messages** (RDM) encourage moderate consumption by conveying positive information on how to consume alcohol, enabling consumers to make informed choices (e.g. [www.responsibledrinking.eu](http://www.responsibledrinking.eu)). RDMs are used on labels but may also be disseminated in commercial communications, in promotional literature (e.g. drink mats), and in the context of **Mass Media Campaigns** (MMC), so as to provide consumers with relevant information throughout the various stages leading them to choose, purchase, and consume alcoholic beverages.

## Some examples of Health Warning Labels

On the right, the French mandatory pictogramme warning against drinking during pregnancy. According to a 2010 Eurobarometer survey, risk awareness for alcohol during pregnancy in France is already high (83%), but below EU-27 average, even though other EU countries do not have such labels. This puts the effectiveness of HWL to raise/maintain risk awareness into question.



In Germany, all premixed/sweet alcoholic drinks must contain a mandatory warning that their ‘sale is prohibited to people under 18’.



## KEY POINTS

- HWL only have a limited impact on raising and maintaining risk awareness and can even carry a risk of unintended consequences
- HWL are not a very cost-effective instrument in EU context, where risk-awareness is already high

### At best HWL can maintain high levels of consumer awareness

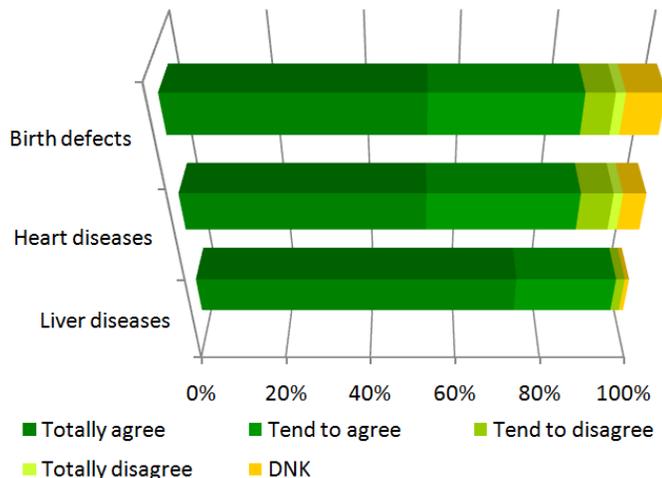
The available evidence shows that HWL have little impact on improving knowledge about potential risks. At best, HWL may maintain levels of risk awareness.

Babor (2003) refers to a study which finds that the ‘*warnings did not increase perceptions of alcohol risk, and may even have made products more attractive to both drinkers and non-drinkers*’. Mosher (1997) holds that ‘*research on the effects of alcohol health warning labels is inconclusive, with only limited evidence of a positive impact on consumer knowledge, attitudes and behavior*’. In a study on US warning labels, Hilton (1993) finds that perception of the described risks was high before the label appeared and has not generally increased.

### Most Europeans are already aware of the main alcohol-related health risks

While 77% of Europeans are in favour of health warnings for pregnancy and drink-driving, the same survey shows that on average across the EU-27, 84% are aware of the risks for the unborn and 67% for drink-driving (Eurobarometer 2010).

Would you agree that alcohol consumption can increase the risk of the following health conditions?



Source: Eurobarometer, European Commission, 2010.

### Notice, recall, process and follow-through: the steps from HWL to responsible consumption

As for advertising messages, HWL may only influence behaviour at the end of a complex chain of reactions, starting from exposure to the message. There may be as many as 9-steps: exposure to the message, noticing it, reacting favourably, comprehending it, agreeing with it, sorting and retaining its content, remembering it, deciding upon it and finally behaving in accordance with this decision. At any step of this tenuous process the causal chain can be broken.

By displaying a directional message and little or no follow-through, HWL are very unlikely to result in actual behavioural change.

### HWL are not the most cost-effective measure

Hankin et al (1996) highlight the dilemma of ‘*the cost-effectiveness of trying to reach the last 20% of women who are not aware of the warning label*’. They conclude that ‘*the costs of reaching this minority may be exorbitant, whereas the benefits may be small*’.

In a recent publication on the ‘*Boomerang Effect*’ Ringold (2004) concludes that ‘*some warnings (...) have been found to produce effects opposite to those intended. (...) An obvious implication is that boomerang effects should be taken into account as one of the potential costs of [...] requiring a warning. In some cases (...) there may be so little to be gained in terms of improved consumer knowledge that the potential cost of oppositional attitudes or behavior should receive substantial attention in the evaluation of proposed and current interventions*’. Other negative consequences are highlighted in studies such as the one by Snyder and Blood (1992) or by Bushman (1998).



## KEY POINTS

- HWL cannot transform risk awareness into responsible consumption patterns: a warned consumer is not necessarily an informed one.
- Absence of positive messages or guidelines and lack of space and visibility are some of the reasons explaining the low effectiveness of HWL.

### HWL are not suitable to convey complex and targeted information

Existing labels on alcoholic beverages can only contain so much information, and a few centimetres cannot display the right kind of contextual information that may induce a responsible attitude to alcohol. It may be more effective to redirect consumers to other sources of information – e.g. internet.

As Kukla (2010, 239) states in her most recent study, *'warned consumers are not informed consumers, and decisions made under the spectre of possible harm are not informed decisions'*.

### **PROTECT** report shows labels aren't effective

"PROTECT" is an EU-funded project run by the German Institute for Addiction and Prevention Research (DISuP) which examined whether health warnings on alcoholic beverages were effective to curb alcohol misuse.

The results of 14 focus groups among 18-25 year olds in 6 European countries show that:

- Participants don't pay attention to labels and remember information better through mass media campaigns and digital sources.
- Some participants claimed they would favour responsible drinking guidelines instead of "forbidding" types of labels.
- A majority of the participants agreed that prevention was above all an educational issue.

## **Literature review: HWL unable to change risky behaviour**

The vast majority of research finds HWL will not change drinking behaviour and will not reduce alcohol-related harm:

In the evidence analysed by Babor et al (2003) *'no direct impacts of warning labels on consumption or alcohol-related problems have been reported'*. Studies focusing on young people conclude that *'there were no substantial changes in alcohol use or beliefs about the risks described in the labels'*. The authors conclude: *'In summary, the warning label research does not demonstrate that exposure produces a change in drinking behaviour per se. Andrews (1995) concludes that 'warning labels are not significantly effective in preventing alcohol consumption by heavy drinkers'*.

Andrews (1995) concludes that *'although frequent and heavier drinkers are aware and have knowledge of consumption risks, they are also likely to discount such information and are quite reticent to change patterns of abusive behaviour'*.

Stockley (2001) finds: *'The conclusion drawn is that such labelling is generally ineffective in changing consumer behaviour and hence such a strategy is inappropriate for reducing alcohol-related harms'*.

MacKinnon et al (2000) conclude: *'There was no beneficial change attributable to the warning in beliefs, alcohol consumption, or driving after drinking'*.

Stockwell (2006) finds in his review of HWL in 16 countries that there is a positive impact of alcohol HWL on recall, awareness, knowledge of the messages and on discussion of the health effects of drinking. However he concludes that *'reviews and primary studies concerning the impacts of the US alcohol warning label experience [...] agree fairly closely that impacts on drinking behaviour are either nonexistent or minimal'*.



## KEY POINTS

- No stand-alone tool is sufficient to communicate complex messages about alcohol-related risks.
- The most successful awareness-raising campaigns are integrated, cross-media, positive, targeted and tailored, which combine positive media communications (TV, print, internet) with messages on labels and advertisements to promote responsible drinking.

### Cross media campaigns more effective at turning risk awareness into responsible consumption patterns

Studies show that stand-alone consumer information methods, including HWL, are not sufficient to change risk-awareness into responsible drinking behaviours.

Mass Media Campaigns (MMC) provide tools for the transfer of information, concepts and ideas to both general and specific audiences. TV and newspapers are considered to be the most powerful and far-reaching media, while radio, magazines and print are able to reach a more targeted audience.

Some studies suggest that encouraging parents to talk with their children about alcohol may have benefits. MMC should therefore include parents as their target.

Websites are also a promising channel of communication on alcohol, especially when brief self-assessment and personalized feed-back are available. These are well received by all age groups and by problem drinkers in different countries. However, more research is needed on consumer information websites, particularly on the settings where they work best (at school, at home, at GP consultation, at hospital, at work) and the long-term effects. Consumer websites in combination with other forms of media are likely to increase awareness.

### Social norms interventions can correct misconceptions about consumption

Social norms marketing is an approach to alcohol education that attempts to correct misperceptions, promoting positive norms in order to replace negative ones. It aims to modify misperceptions through institutional and public policy measures and through education programmes. A recent systematic review of studies by Moreira et al. (2009, 2) concludes: *'Interventions delivered using the web or computer, or in individual face-to-face sessions appeared to reduce alcohol misuse'*.

To date, most social norms marketing has been targeted at young people, particularly in college campuses in the USA. The approach is based on the finding that most students overestimate their peer's drinking levels, and therefore have a wrong idea of how much they 'should' be drinking. Correcting these misperceptions can help reduce heavy drinking and harmful outcomes. Evaluation of these approaches has shown promising results: decreases have been reported in heavy episodic drinking, injuries to self and to others (e.g. Fabioan, 2003; Haines & Baker, 2003; Perkins & Craig, 2002).

### Case Study: French campaign to curb obesity

[mangerbouger.fr](http://mangerbouger.fr)

Although addressing a very different public health concern, this French mass media and cross media campaign to promote healthy eating provides plenty of useful evidence of the various features which can be part of a successful consumer information campaign.

This programme was a combination of positive responsible eating messages on TV, internet and radio, as well as a link to a website giving tailored information for each category of target audience.

A global survey analyzing the impact of this campaign revealed that 71% of respondents recalled the messages and that 79% thought they were effective. 91% of those who remembered the messages saw them on TV, while only 5% remember having seen them on a product label or packaging.

More than half of respondents claimed they were going to change their eating habits. And importantly, 36% of children who viewed the messages claimed they discussed the programme with their friends or their parents.

Source: INPES



## Case Study **drinkaware.co.uk**

**Drinkaware** is an independent, UK-wide charity, supported by voluntary donations from across the drinks industry to equip people with the knowledge they need to make decisions about how much they drink.

This programme aims to change the UK's drinking habits. It promotes responsible drinking and finds innovative ways to challenge the drinking culture to help reduce alcohol misuse and minimise alcohol-related harm.

The objectives of **Drinkaware** are the following:

- Increase **awareness** of:
  - Why and how to drink safely and responsibly.
  - The impact of alcohol misuse on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities.
- Improve **attitudes** towards:
  - Motivation and personal responsibility to drink safely
  - The unacceptability of binge drinking and drink-related disorder.
- Induce positive changes in **behaviour** related to alcohol consumption

These objectives are achieved through tailored campaigns communicating with:

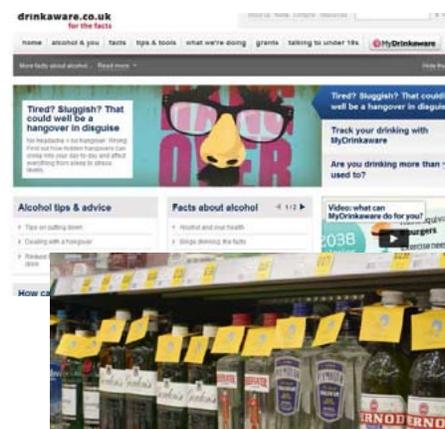
- **Young people and their parents** (“how and when to start talking to children about alcohol?”)
- **Young adults** (“why let the good times go bad?”)
- **All adults** (“how much is too much?”)

Each campaign is echoed by a strong presence in the media.

As a result, the **Drinkaware** website is the number one source of information on alcohol in the UK, being on top of search results on search engines such as Google, and reaching on average 2.1 million unique visitors a year. The consumer-friendly content and engaging tools have driven deeper engagement with health related content and increased the number of returning visitors by 90% of the last 12 months.

In order to turn risk awareness into cultural change, **Drinkaware** has:

- Developed a consistent Drinkaware brand
  - Planned annual strategy and campaigns
  - Consumer friendly tone and manner; “your best mate”
- Employed proven social marketing principles
  - Messages and campaigns that motivate the public to change behaviour
  - All campaigns based on rigorous consumer insight
- Focused on landing a few big messages
  - Parental role models – When to talk to your children?
  - Getting drunk isn't cool – Why let good times go bad?
  - Unit awareness – How much is too much?



### **Positive change in attitude with “Why let good time go bad”:**

Two years of this massive social marketing campaign shows that **70% of the target audience are more likely to consider drinking differently in the future**. Results also show widespread adoption of the campaign tips (eg, pacing alcoholic drinks with water and looking after mates) with **77% of young adults claiming to have already adopted at least one of the tips and 74% saying they are likely to follow the tips in the future**.

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## Getting the facts right

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