



## Alcohol Warning Labels

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The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) supports providing the public with information to help them make informed choices about the use of alcohol. The Centre's position on warning labels has remained consistent since we addressed this subject to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health in 1996.

Alcohol is not like other products. There are risks associated with its use, risks that are largely preventable.

Alcohol affects the nervous system, impairing mental judgement and coordination, making accidents and injuries the prime cause of alcohol-related deaths. Long-term use of alcohol can cause neurologic disorders and damage to the liver, heart and other organs. Alcohol has been linked to several types of cancer. Chronic alcohol use is a major cause of disability and death in Canada, and the associated economic costs are substantial. Alcohol is also a human teratogen which causes damage to infants heavily exposed before birth. In extreme cases this is described as fetal alcohol syndrome, characterized by impaired growth, physical malformations and developmental delay.

The public interest in warning labels lies in the potential of such warnings to prevent illness, injury or death if consumers do not use the product in a hazardous way.

Alcoholic beverages contain the psychoactive drug ethanol. They should therefore be treated like other products that contain psychoactive elements. Cough remedies containing alcohol are required to include warnings about exceeding a recommended dose, driving and operating machinery, and medical contraindications, while beverages containing this same drug carry none of these warnings.

People who should not use alcohol or who should restrict their use may include any of the following:

- 1) those with a history of uncontrolled drinking or drug use,
- 2) those with medical conditions which may be aggravated by alcohol or who are taking medications,
- 3) pregnant women, and
- 4) those who need to remain alert for safety reasons.

Canadian brewers and distillers and Health Canada have recognized the hazards associated with alcohol. Their frequent public education campaigns have aimed to inform the public about the potential hazards of drinking, particularly as related to drinking and driving and drinking during pregnancy. In this context, it would be consistent for the Canadian government to require warning labels on alcoholic beverages to ensure that consumers have the information they need about a product that has potential risks.

If alcohol warning labels are mandated CAMH would recommend that the following be considered:

- (1) Warning labels must not be considered in isolation, since knowledge alone rarely results in changed behaviour. Warning labels reinforce, rather than replace other forms of education. Labelling should be seen as just one part of a broader public health effort to reduce alcohol-related harm. That effort should also include ongoing public education, responsive public policy and availability of effective treatment services.

- (2) Warning labels should not focus on alcohol-related birth defects alone, since they represent a small part of the harm to the health and wellbeing of Canadians caused by alcohol. Far greater are the hospitalizations, disabilities and early deaths that arise from alcohol-related injuries, liver disease, neurological disorders, and addiction. Similarly, pregnant women make up only a very small percentage of those who are at increased risk of alcohol-related problems, or who should be made aware of the potential hazards of drinking. However, warnings about drinking during pregnancy should focus on what the public doesn't know. Pregnant women need to be informed that they can reduce the risk by cutting down now. There should also be an emphasis on directing pregnant women to seek medical/addiction-related treatment service.
- (3) Evidence from the tobacco sector shows that the design of warning labels greatly influences their impact and effectiveness, including type and number of messages and specific wording. Regulations on size, placement, font, and colour are needed to ensure labels are seen and read.
- (4) Messages most likely to be recalled contain new information, a rationale for rotating warning messages and periodically changing them. Messages are also more convincing if they are personalized and relevant to the consumer.
- (5) Research for cigarette warnings reveals a number of techniques to make the messages more effective. Not using words such as 'can' and 'may,' personalizing the message and citing a government health authority such as Health Canada strengthens public acceptance of the health consequences presented. A government health warning also serves to underscore information obtained from other sources.
- (6) Research on tobacco labels suggests that warning labels will have greater impact if the specific message is not well known. However newer and more specific messages should be evaluated as well as those with more positive behaviour-oriented advice. Examples of more novel messages might include:
  - Alcohol causes high blood pressure
  - Alcohol should not be used by people with bleeding disorders
  - It may be dangerous to use alcohol with certain medicines
  - Reducing alcohol use early in pregnancy greatly increases the chance of a healthy baby
- (7) Labels that incorporate messages about potential health benefits should not be permitted. This is a complex medical issue and only certain individuals, at high risk for heart disease, are expected to achieve any net health benefit from moderate drinking relative to abstinence.
- (8) Consumer information about the alcohol content of standard drinks should be considered for inclusion on the label along with the warnings. The public is often unaware of standard serving sizes and typically underestimates the amount of alcohol consumed. CAMH has addressed this through the promotion of the "Low Risk Drinking Guidelines".
- (9) As warning notices on consumer products become commonplace, the lack of a government warning on alcoholic beverages potentially sends an unintended message, and may make other information about harmful effects less believable.
- (10) Evaluation should be conducted throughout the development, implementation and use of warning labels in order to assess their effectiveness. To guarantee that the labels are effective, we recommend that labels be subjected to formal pre-testing and subsequently their format be specified in regulations.

The greatest value in this approach of using warning labels on alcoholic beverage containers is that exposure to alcohol and to the warnings are linked. Frequent users repeatedly see the warning and are reminded of the potential risks they may be taking each time they drink.

In summary, because the warning labels represent a minimal public expenditure, they can be a cost-effective prevention tool, even if their impact is small. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health supports efforts to place this type of product information on alcoholic beverages, but recommends that warning labels be a part of a more comprehensive prevention strategy.