

The alcohol industry is not meeting its 'Responsibility Deal' labelling pledges

A new study from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, published online today in the journal *Addiction*, has found that the signatories to the Public Health Responsibility Deal alcohol labelling pledge are not fully meeting their pledge. Labelling information frequently falls short of best practice, with fonts and logos smaller than would be accepted on other products with health effects.

The UK Public Health Responsibility Deal was launched in 2011 as a public-private partnership among industry, government, public bodies and voluntary organisations. Organisations involved make voluntary pledges designed to improve public health. Over 100 organisations have signed the alcohol labelling pledge, promising to “ensure that over 80% of products on shelf will have labels with clear unit content, NHS guidelines and a warning about drinking when pregnant.”

This pledge consists of three required elements: (1) The number of units in the drink, (2) the Chief Medical Officers' daily guidelines for lower-risk consumption, and (3) a warning about the risks of drinking while pregnant. Accompanying guidance states that this information should be clear, legible, displayed on the primary packaging and not difficult for consumers to find. Companies are encouraged to use a font size no smaller than the main body of information.

The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine researchers looked at labelling on the 100 top-selling UK alcohol brands. The first three (required) elements were present on 77.6% of products examined. The mean font size of the Chief Medical Officers' unit guidelines was 8.17 point and the mean size of pregnancy logos was 5.95mm. Existing guidelines on packaging inserts for medicines suggests a minimum font size of 9-12 point. Overall, alcohol labels very frequently fall short of best practice, with poor legibility and clarity a particular problem.

One finding of particular concern was that the pregnancy logo was significantly smaller on wine bottles than on beer/lager/cider containers (5.1mm vs 7.1mm). In the UK, men are more likely to drink beer than women, and women are more likely to drink wine.

New labelling guidance could be derived from existing guidance on medicines, tobacco packaging and other products which, like alcohol, carry known health risks. Compliance with labelling guidance also needs to be monitored and reported on independently of industry bodies.

Lead author Professor Mark Petticrew said, “Alcohol labelling can help consumers make an informed choice about health risks and about consumption, so it is important that it is clear and legible. Our findings suggest that this is very often not the case.”

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For editors:

Petticrew M, Douglas N, Knai C, Durand M-A, Eastmure E, and Mays N. (2015) Health information on alcoholic beverage containers: has the alcohol industry's voluntary agreement in England to improve labelling been met? *Addiction* 110: [doi:10.1111/add.13094](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13094)