

30 August 2023

PI049 - Call for submissions: Carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcoholic beverages

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the call for submissions for Proposal PI049- Carbohydrate and sugar claims on alcoholic beverages. The Tasmanian Department of Health appreciates the intent to ensure clarity and certainty as the reason for raising this proposal. Note that the Department of Health has consistently maintained a preference for a prohibition on health claims. The Department of Health prefers **option 3** – remove the permission in the Code to make nutrition content claims about carbohydrate on alcoholic beverages.

Rationale for supporting option 3 is outlined is below.

Removing permission aligns with the original intent of the standard and with Ministerial guidance and concerns

The original policy intent of Std 1.2.7 was to prohibit claims on alcoholic beverages. In 2017 Food Ministers raised concerns that % sugar free claims were misleading and that alcohol was being promoted as a healthier choice for consumers when public health advice is to limit alcohol intake. Work undertaken by FSANZ in 2018 to address that issue concluded that the Code should align with the Ministers' original intent, specifically, the technical assessment concluded the policy *intent* was that claims specifically about the 'sugar' content of foods containing alcohol were not to be permitted by Standard 1.2.7 (FSANZ, 2018). That the alcohol industry has found the loophole and have proceeded to use it to market alcohol against the intent of the Code and Food Ministers' concerns, should not be a reason to override the original intent indefinitely by proceeding with option 2, permission to use these nutrition content claims on alcohol.

Health claims on alcohol are predominantly a marketing device, rather than a mechanism for consumer information/choice.

Alcoholic drinks are of little nutritive benefit, and consumption can impair absorption of beneficial nutrients. One of the core pillars of the national alcohol strategy, which is included in the preventive health strategy, is to limit promotion and marketing of alcohol. As public health strategies increasingly look to regulating promotion of alcohol, the industry looks for alternative approaches to appeal to consumers and have a competitive advantage. Health-oriented marketing features are becoming more prevalent on alcohol products in Australia. These features are used with the aim of increasing perceived healthfulness and reducing perceived risk of products (White et al 2017). A recent study systematically documenting the prevalence of health-oriented marketing showed more than half of all cider, beers and ready-to-drink (RTD) premixed beverages used health-orienting marketing features and that of the nutrient content claims, sugar claims appeared on nearly one in five ciders (17%) and RTDs (20%) (Haynes et al 2022).

Alcoholic products marketed as better-for-you appear to rely on an illusion of healthfulness, without addressing the ingredient of most concern to health, the alcohol content. Data from the Australian market shows that of all the alcohol products marketed with 'better-for-you' options, most were full strength alcohol (Keric et al 2022). Alcohol, a known carcinogen, is the more harmful component of alcoholic beverages. Many consumers are still unaware that consuming alcohol contributes to cancer, cerebrovascular, cardiovascular, liver and digestive disease (Department of Health 2021). Alcohol is also the major contributor to energy from these products, not the carbohydrate or sugars and consumer understanding of this fact is poor. There is a potential health halo effect of health claims on alcoholic beverages to mislead consumers to perceive them as a healthy choice within a harmful category, distracting them from the main harm, the alcohol content. Consumers perception of sugar claims do suggest a health halo effect, with one study showing they perceive them as less harmful to health, help with weight control and lower in alcohol (when they were not) (Cao et al 2022).

A sugar claim can distract and mislead consumers to align with the health guidance regarding limiting alcohol itself. The alcohol component is the more harmful and energy dense component of these products than sugar or carbohydrate. The evidence presented in the consumer literature review suggests these claims do lead to consumers mistakenly perceiving these labelled products as healthier and lower in alcohol, which they are not. It also concludes the presence of these claims may lead consumers to be less likely to exercise or change their diet. These claims on alcohol are not in line with ambitions under current public health strategies and can undermine public health efforts.

1. Do you have or are you aware of any evidence to suggest that nutrition content claims about carbohydrate and/or sugar on alcoholic beverages affect consumers’:

(a) level of consumption of alcoholic beverages?

(b) level of physical activity?

(c) general food intake?

No additional studies. The evidence provided in the consumer literature review indicates the presence of these claims can lead consumers to do the following:

- Make inaccurate assumptions about the products
- Perceive products to be lower alcohol (when not)
- Underestimate contribution of alcohol to energy intake
- Less likely to exercise
- Less likely to modify diet.

These are all counter to public health messages that are crucial to public health efforts in the field of prevention and demonstrate these claims have potential to do more harm than good and should not be allowed on alcohol, as per the original intent of the Standard.

5. Do you agree with FSANZ’s current overall consideration of costs and benefits?

Sugar claims on alcoholic beverages are a form of marketing for a health-harming product. The cost of alcohol-related harms in Australia and the potential for these claims to confuse and set back prevention efforts across alcohol, physical activity and nutrition fields must be considered alongside costs to the alcohol industry.

References

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Haynes A, Chen YJM, Dixon H, Krattli SN, Gu L, and Wakefield M. 2022. Health-Oriented Marketing on Alcoholic Drinks: An Online Audit and Comparison of Nutrition Content of Australian Products. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 2022 83:5 , 750-759

Keric D, Myers G, Stafford J. Health halo or genuine product development: Are better-for-you alcohol products actually healthier? *Health Promot J Austral.* 2022;33:782–787.)

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