

PM+: EU has responsibility to 'inform consumers' through alcohol labelling

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Opinion Plus

Mariann Skar urges incoming EU leadership to include alcoholic drinks in food labelling standards.



The European institutions must address the loophole created by allowing alcoholic drinks not to carry food information and in particular, energy value. For instance an average half a litre of beer of five per cent alcohol has an approximate 220 calories; a large glass of red wine of 13 per cent alcohol has 170 calories and average drink of whiskey with 40 per cent alcohol has 111 calories.

When a consumer drinks an alcoholic beverage, there is almost a 100 per cent chance that he or she does not know what they are drinking, unless they are determined enough to go through the effort of searching on the company's website.

One of the objectives of the public bodies should be to protect people effectively from the risks and threats that they cannot tackle as individuals. In 2011 the European Union passed legislation that requires food and any other soft drinks to list their nutritional information and ingredients. However,

alcoholic beverages were exempted from this obligation.

Being high in sugar means alcohol contains a considerable number of calories, with energy content of 7.1 kilocalories per gram, only fat has higher energy value per gram (9kcal/g). Studies in the UK have shown that alcohol accounts for nearly 10 per cent of the calorie intake amongst adults who drink.

Some studies in the US have found that men consume around 8210 kilocalories from alcohol a month and women 3790. Weight gain is a major concern for many people, based on the latest estimates in EU countries; overweight affects between 30 and 70 per cent, and obesity affects 10 to 30 per cent of adults, however little attention is placed on the calories contained in alcohol-based beverages.

"Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of fat the body burns for energy"

Drinking alcohol reduces the amount of fat the body burns for energy. While nutrients, protein, carbohydrates and fat can be stored in the body, alcohol cannot. Therefore, the body system wants to get rid of it and it takes priority; all of the other processes that should be taking place including absorbing nutrients and burning fat are interrupted.

Many people forget to include alcoholic drinks when watching what they eat. It is easy for calories from alcohol to add up quickly and unnoticed. Alcohol is also an appetite stimulant and can lead to overeating at mealtimes and late at night.

"Providing the energy value would allow consumers to monitor their diets better and make it easier to keep a healthy lifestyle"

The EU institutions are perfectly positioned to coordinate common efforts to inform consumers of both the composition as well as harmful effects of alcohol. Providing the energy value would allow consumers to monitor their diets better and make it easier to keep a healthy lifestyle.

It is really perplexing why European decisions makers have excluded alcoholic drinks from the requirement to list their content and have refused consumers their right to know what is in their drinks. The European Commission is obliged to produce a report on the matter by December 2014.

Eurocare calls on the new European political leadership to bring alcoholic labelling in line with non-alcoholic beverage packaging and protect consumers' right to make fully informed choices.

About the author

Mariann Skar is secretary general of European alcohol policy alliance (Eurocare)

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