

# Opinion: Australia should follow Ireland's lead and add stronger health warning labels to alcohol

June 8 2023, by Emmanuel Kuntsche, Paula O'Brien and Robin Room

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

From [August 2023](#), Australian beer, wine, spirits and pre-mixed drinks have to warn of the harms of drinking alcohol while pregnant. But they don't have to mention the other harms of alcohol for the wider population.

Ireland [recently signed legislation](#) to introduce tougher [alcohol](#) warning labels, to warn about the risks of liver disease and fatal cancers from drinking alcohol. These will be in place from 2026.

Considering the ongoing efforts of the industry to undermine the introduction of [effective alcohol labeling](#) worldwide, the Irish example is an important victory for public health.

In Australia, it's time to put consumer health and rights before commercial interests and warn people drinking and buying alcohol of the risks.

## **Educating consumers about the health risks**

Alcohol causes [more than 200 diseases, injuries and other health conditions](#).

There is strong evidence that from the first drink, the risk of various cancers (of the breast, liver, colon, rectum, oropharynx, larynx and esophagus) [increases](#). This is [because](#):

- ethanol (pure alcohol) and its toxic by-product acetaldehyde damages cells by binding with DNA, causing cells to replicate incorrectly
- alcohol influences hormone levels, which can modify how cells grow and divide
- direct tissue damage can occur, increasing the absorption of other cancer-causing substances.

Alcohol use kills [more than four Australians](#) a day (the highest rate in

the past decade) and results in [A\\$182 million of avoidable costs](#) per day.

Yet only half of Australians know drinking alcohol [can cause cancer](#).

[Research shows](#) mandatory health labeling is an important way to increase awareness and should form part of a comprehensive [alcohol control strategy](#).

## Countering industry influence

The alcohol industry currently uses alcohol labels and packaging as a marketing and branding tool. Alcohol warning labels help counter these marketing messages.

Alcohol industry interests have so far succeeded in exempting [alcoholic drinks](#) from the usual [consumer information requirements](#). Under the [international labeling guidelines](#), all [processed foods](#) must have all ingredients listed on the [label](#). But alcohol industry interests have so far succeeded in these rules [not being applied to alcoholic beverages](#).

In Australia, the [alcohol content](#) and number of standard drinks must be [listed on the product's label](#). However, there is no requirement, as for other foods and drinks, that ingredients (except for certain allergens such as milk or gluten) and nutritional information (energy, carbohydrates, and so on) be listed.

Aside from warnings to [pregnant women](#) to abstain from alcohol, there is no provision for consumer information about the risks of alcohol consumption on alcohol packaging. Yet such warnings are required for other hazardous substances taken into the body, such as tobacco.

## How Ireland is leading the charge

Ireland is leading the world with its alcohol labeling. From 2026, drinks containing alcohol will have to inform consumers about the specific risks of liver disease and fatal cancers.

Labels will also have to notify buyers of the alcohol risks to pregnancy, the calorie content of the beverage, and the number of grams of alcohol it contains.

The new labeling move [demonstrates](#) the government has prioritized reducing alcohol-related disease and has widespread support. A recent [household survey](#) in Ireland found 81.9% of the more than 1,000 participants supported the introduction of health warning labels on alcohol.

## **Barriers to overcome in Australia**

In 2020, in the face of intense pressure from industry groups, the Australian government decided on new labeling requirements for alcoholic beverages, but only to warn about the risks of drinking during pregnancy. From a [public health](#) point of view, this was a mediocre compromise.

Australia is currently considering introducing energy content (kilojoule) labeling on alcoholic beverages. This would be a positive step and but it is as far as Australia seems willing to go for now. There are no plans for Australia to follow Ireland's lead.

Some countries seem to be [gearing up](#) to use the World Trade Organization's processes to oppose Ireland's new labels.

Australia [previously opposed](#) enhanced alcohol warning labels Thailand proposed, at the same time Australia was seeking international support for its tobacco plain packaging laws. This time, Australia should

prioritize the public's health over commercial interests and support Ireland's alcohol warning messages in the World Trade Organization.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Australia should follow Ireland's lead and add stronger health warning labels to alcohol (2023, June 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-opinion-australia-ireland-stronger-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.