

Call for ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages to be reduced in sugar and calories

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Gin and Tonic. Credit: Pixabay

Popular ready-to-drink premixed spirits sold in major UK retailers are unnecessarily high in hidden sugar and calories and should be forced to reformulate immediately to the agreed criterion set by government in the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) or pay the fine, according to a NEW product survey by Action on Sugar at Queen Mary University of London to mark Sugar Awareness Week (20th-26th January 2020).

The group of experts warn that sugary alcoholic drinks are contributing to obesity, type 2 diabetes, various cancers, liver damage and [tooth decay](#) as consumers are unknowingly drinking large amounts of [sugar](#) and calories. Action on Sugar is now urging the government to prove it really is committed to prevention and reducing inequalities, by stepping in and taking control of not only the food and drink industries, but also the alcohol industry.

Action on Sugar surveyed a total of 202 'ready to drink' alcoholic beverages sold in-store and online. Out of the 154 products collected in-store, [nutrition information](#) on pack was shockingly low making it

difficult for consumers to know exactly what they are drinking:

- Only 63 products (41%) in-store had some form of nutrition information on pack
- Only 14 products (9%) had "sugar" information on pack

Due to the lack of information provided on pack (in-store), Action on Sugar commissioned independent laboratory analysis of 21 products (in addition to the information available on pack and on drink manufacturer's websites), which has exposed for the first time the alarming and unnecessary variation of sugar and calories to the public.

Traditional premixed cocktails

Many drinks in this category were exceedingly high in sugar. Notwithstanding its larger pack size (500ml), TGI Friday's Passion Fruit Martini has over 12 teaspoons of sugar (49.1g)—the same as [drinking](#) nearly two cans of Red Bull.

Fruit Based/"Soft' Mixed Drink

The worst offender in this category was WKD Blue. If you were to drink a large 700ml bottle it would provide a staggering 59g sugar—the same as eating over four iced donuts in one sitting.

Yet again the [sugar content](#) in similar drinks varies considerably—proving reformulation can be achieved. For example, a 250ml can of Breezer Lemon and Elderflower Flavoured Alcoholic Drink has over five teaspoons of sugar (20.8g), compared to Balans Lime Aqua Spritz at 0.5g sugar per 250ml can.

Spirit/liqueur and Mixer (excluding gin)

The worst offenders in this category have in excess of 30g sugar (8 teaspoons) in a serving—more sugar than nine custard cream biscuits.

Interestingly Jack Daniel's Whiskey and Cola has a larger sized can (i.e. 330ml) than Malibu Cola (250ml), yet is still lower in sugar, due to the higher sugar content of sweetened liqueurs.

The findings also clearly demonstrate that lower sugar products can be produced easily. For example, Asda Vodka, Lime & Lemonade has 12g sugar (3tsp) in a 250ml can, whilst Classic Combinations Vodka Lime and Lemonade has over a teaspoon of sugar extra at 16.2g sugar per 250ml can.

Gin & Mixers

The sweetest gin and mixer was Classic Combinations Pink Gin and Tonic, containing a 27g of sugar in a 250ml can—the same sugar content as Coke. This is followed by Classic Combinations Rhubarb Gin and Ginger Ale with over five teaspoons of sugar (20.8g) in a 250ml can.

In comparison, Tanqueray Sevilla Gin and Tonic has a third less sugar at 18g, proving once again that it is possible to make this type of drink with much less sugar. A gin and tonic with diet/light/low sugar mixers were all 0g sugar per serve, except for Sipsmith London Dry Gin and Light Tonic (3.3g sugar per serve).

Registered Nutritionist, Holly Gabriel at Action on Sugar, says: "This is the first time a survey of this kind has been conducted and the results highlight an immediate need for alcoholic drinks to be included in vital public health policies.

"Customers should be able to purchase better options and reformulating these drinks with less sugar, calories and alcohol is one way to achieve this. Our survey clearly shows that similar drinks can be made with less sugar and calories, yet drink manufacturers are failing to take the appropriate action. Urgent attention is required from the government to ensure that gaps in the law do not contribute to the rise in obesity and related health conditions, as well as alcohol harm."

Katharine Jenner, Campaign Director at Action on Sugar, based at Queen Mary University of London, says: "'Gin in a tin' has become a cultural

phenomenon with these types of drinks often consumed 'on the go' and without a moment's consideration to how much sugar and alcohol goes into making them. Even if you did want to know, you can't make a healthy choice as only one in ten of the products surveyed had enough information available. If consumers knew how much sugar was really in these drinks, would they still happily choose to drink their way to tooth decay, obesity and type 2 diabetes?"

Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at Queen Mary University of London and Chairman of Action on Sugar, explains: "Sugary alcoholic drinks are a double burden on our health: alcohol causes serious harm, and sugar in these drinks carries the same health risks as sugar in any other food or drink, which costs the NHS billions and shortens lives.

"It is a national scandal that because these drinks contain alcohol, they are not subject to the sugar tax or any form of coherent nutrition labeling. The new government needs to act now by taking control of the alcohol industry and stop them from exploiting vulnerable young adults."

More information: Alcohol Data: www.actiononsugar.org/media/academic-reports/Alcohol-DATA.pdf

Alcohol Survey Report: www.actiononsugar.org/media/academic-reports/Alcohol-Survey-Report.pdf

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

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