

AlcoholNZ article

Title

Consumer information – The energy content of alcoholic beverages

At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's June 2017 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz).
- It provides analysis of a question in HPA's 2016 Health and Lifestyles Survey about whether having energy content (ie, kilojoules or Calories) on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink.
- Many people are unaware of the energy content of alcoholic beverages. Most alcoholic beverages do not have energy content information on the label.
- One third of respondents agreed that energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink or what they choose to drink.
- Females were significantly more likely than males to agree and those aged 15 to 54 years were significantly more likely to agree than those aged 55+ years.

Citation

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Consumer information

The energy content of alcoholic beverages

Many people are unaware of the energy content (ie, kilojoules (kJ) or calories) of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol is broken down and used by the body to provide energy. Each gram of alcohol has an average energy value of 29.3kJ (or 7 calories). This is more energy per gram than protein (16.7kJ/g) or carbohydrate (16.7kJ/g) but less than fat (37.7kJ/g) (National Health and Medical Research Council & Ministry of Health, 2016). One standard drink of an alcohol beverage (containing 10g of pure alcohol) has an energy content of 293kJ (or 70 calories) or more, depending on the amount of carbohydrate/sugar and fat in the beverage and in any mixers, such as soft drinks.

Consumer information labelling requirements

The Australia and New Zealand Food Standards Code requires that beverages that contain more than 0.5% alcohol by volume must display the alcohol content on the label. Labels must also state the number of standard drinks in the package. A 'standard drink' is specified as the amount of beverage that contains 10g of alcohol at 20°C (Food Standards Australia New Zealand, 2014).

Alcoholic beverages, unlike non-alcoholic beverages, are usually not required, however, to display ingredients lists or nutrition information on labels. If a claim about energy content, carbohydrate content or gluten content is made about an alcoholic beverage, then nutrition information must be provided on its label, including energy but not alcohol. All other health claims and nutrition content claims are prohibited on alcoholic beverages (and other foods) that contain more than 1.15% alcohol by volume (Food Standards Australia New Zealand, 2014). Some New Zealand alcohol producers, mainly beer producers, do provide nutrition information, including energy content, on labels or on their websites. This information is provided either voluntarily or as a requirement because a claim has been made.

Internationally, a number of public health and consumer organisations are calling for the mandatory labelling of ingredients lists and nutrition information, especially the labelling of energy value, on alcoholic beverages as part of a comprehensive strategy to provide information and educate consumers about alcohol (European Commission, 2017; Royal Society for Public Health, 2014). The Australia and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation is at the early stages of considering energy labelling of alcohol beverages. Progress updates are available on foodregulation.gov.au.

Consumer opinion about having energy content information on alcoholic beverages

There is limited research about consumer awareness and knowledge of the energy content of alcoholic beverages and also whether having this information would lead to behaviour change. To help fill the knowledge gap, the Health Promotion Agency included a new question in its 2016 Health and Lifestyles Survey (HLS) to investigate whether New Zealand adults (18+ years) think that having energy content information on alcohol beverages would influence how and what they drink.

Survey sample

HLS is a biennial monitor of health behaviours and attitudes of New Zealanders aged 15 years and over. It is conducted nationwide through face-to-face interviews and was first carried out in 2008. The 2016 HLS consisted of a sample of 3,854 New Zealanders. All analyses in this article used a restricted base (n=2,666) of respondents aged 18 years or over who reported drinking alcohol in the past year.

Analysis results

Survey participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

Having nutrition information about energy content (that is, calories or kilojoules) on alcoholic beverages would influence how much I drink, or what I choose to drink.

Respondents were not provided with information about the energy content of alcoholic drinks before being asked the question about energy content labelling; nor were they asked what they knew about the nutritional content of alcoholic drinks.

Overall, one-third (34%) of respondents agreed that energy content information on alcohol beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink, while 13% were neutral and 51% disagreed.

Out of those who agreed that energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink:

- females (39%) were significantly more likely than males (28%) to report that energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink (see infographic)
- agreement did not vary by ethnicity or by drinking frequency
- those aged 15 to 54 years (36%) were significantly more likely to report that energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink, than those aged 55 years and over (28%) (see infographic).

Further analysis explored whether reported use of nutrition information labels on food and non-alcoholic drinks was associated with agreement that energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much and what alcohol they bought or consumed. A question in the 2016 HLS asked respondents if they used nutrition labels on food and non-alcoholic drinks. It was found that:

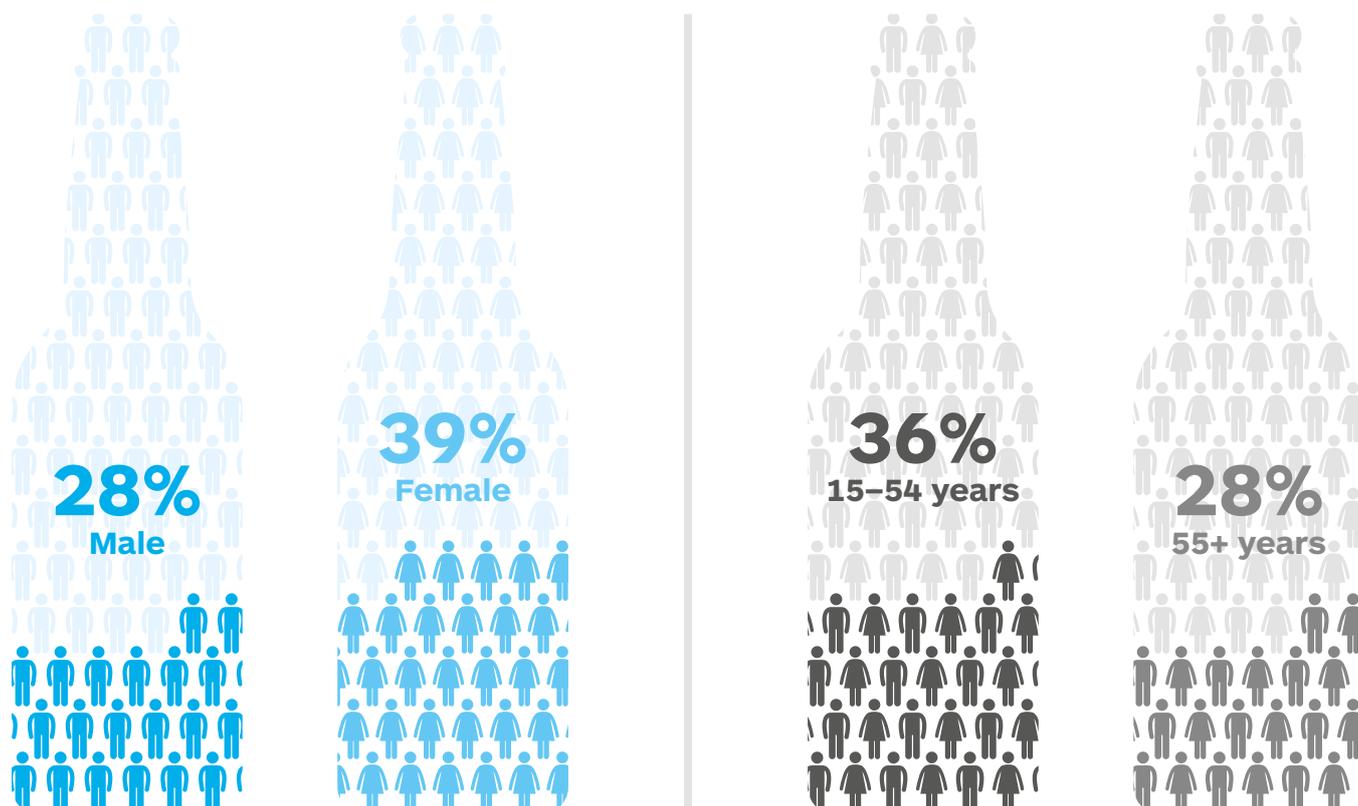
- respondents who reported using nutrition labels on food and non-alcoholic drinks to inform their purchasing choices (47%) were significantly more likely to agree that having energy content information on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink, than those who did not report using nutrition labels on food (32%).

How the data was analysed

The data presented above is weighted. This means that the reported percentages are adjusted to account for each respondent's probability of selection, as well as population benchmarks to ensure that no population groups are under- or over-represented in estimates from the survey.

Differences between sub-groups (eg, gender, age, ethnicity) were tested using logistic regression. In the text, differences between sub-groups are said to be 'significant' when p -value < 0.05.

Proportion of respondents agreeing that ‘having nutrition information about energy content on alcoholic beverages would influence how much they drink, or what they choose to drink’, by gender and by age*



* 2016 Health and Lifestyles Survey.

Responses to the question about having energy labelling on alcoholic beverages were sorted into four groups: ‘agree’, ‘neutral’, ‘disagree’ and ‘don’t know/refused’. The *agree* group comprised those who responded with ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. The *neutral* group comprised those who responded with ‘neither agree nor disagree’.

References

European Commission. (2017). *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council regarding the mandatory labelling of the list of ingredients and the nutrition declaration of alcoholic beverages*. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/fs_labelling-nutrition_legis_alcohol-report_en.pdf.

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