

Health warning labels on alcoholic beverages in the WHO European Region in 2024

- Product labelling enables consumers to make informed decisions about the products they purchase and consume. Health warnings about potential health risks of the product are an important part of labelling
- Alcohol health warning labels are messages placed on alcoholic beverage containers or packaging to inform about the potential health risks of alcohol consumption (1)
- Despite the various health risks associated with alcohol consumption, many people remain unaware of them (2).
- Health warnings on alcohol labels can inform consumers and the general population (including those who do not consume alcohol) about potential risks, increase awareness of alcohol-related harms, and reduce the appeal of alcoholic beverages.

What are health warnings on labels of alcoholic beverages and why are they important?

Labelling of alcohol encompasses brand name, type, alcohol content, ingredients, nutritional information, serving recommendations, and health warnings.

An overarching concern with current alcohol labelling practices, globally and in Europe, is the lack of standardization and comprehensive provisions, unlike medicine, food, and non-alcoholic beverages.

The impact of health warnings depends on practical details such as size, format, and color, as well as the specific messages conveyed. Messages targeting the general population and addressing broader topics like the risk of cancers due to alcohol may have a different impact than those targeting specific groups, such as underage drinking or alcohol use during pregnancy.

Which countries in the WHO European Region have mandatory health warnings on labels of alcoholic beverages?

In 2024, only 13 out of the 53 Member States of the WHO European Region had mandatory health warnings on alcohol labels, which inform consumers about various risks associated with alcohol consumption. (1)

Out of these 13 countries, five are Member States of the Eurasian Economic Union where health warning labels were introduced as part of their Technical Regulations on safety of alcoholic beverages, which is currently the only international document to mandate health warnings for alcoholic beverages (3). Only three are countries of the European Union (EU).

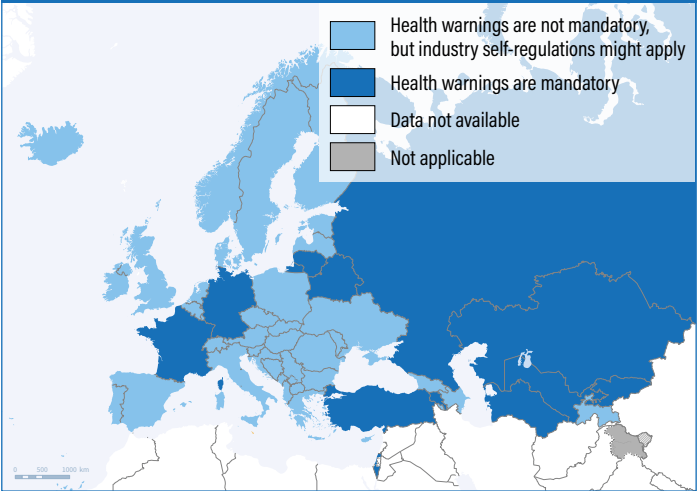
In other Member States labels might feature health warnings as part of voluntary self-regulatory codes of the alcohol industry, but there are no regulations that require them by law.

Alcohol health warning labels are mandated in only 3 out of 27 EU Member States (11%) and 10 out of 26 non-EU Member States (38%)

Recent developments in the WHO European Region

In 2023, Ireland introduced regulations under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act requiring all alcohol labels to display warnings about cancer, liver disease, and pregnancy symbols by May 2026 (4). Furthermore, Norway has been progressing towards mandatory health warnings on alcohol products. In December 2018, the Norwegian Parliament endorsed a new alcohol strategy, asking the government to propose requirements for warning labels on alcoholic beverages. In 2022, the Norwegian Directorate of Health recommended health warnings on labels, including information about alcohol and cancer. Subsequently, in 2023, the Norwegian Minister of Health and Care instructed the Directorate of Health to draft a proposal on alcohol health warnings.

Figure 1. Health warnings on labels of alcoholic beverages across WHO European Region. Based on an update of the WHO Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 68 (1)



Compared to tobacco, this is a very low implementation rate of health warnings. Health warnings on cigarettes packages are mandated in all 53 Member States of the WHO European Region.

Figure 2. Mandatory label that will appear on alcohol product containers in Ireland by May 2026, following the national public health regulations from 2023 (4)



What messages are included on labels?

Health warning labels on alcohol vary in wording across different countries of the Region. Most countries mandate messages that relate to specific population groups and specific risks only, such as alcohol use by young people or during pregnancy. While several countries have a broader message indicating that alcohol is harmful to health, most of these messages refer to terms like “excessive use” or “alcohol misuse” while Turkmenistan is currently the only country to have a general message saying “alcoholic beverages are harmful to your health”.

Table 1: Messages of health warning labels specified in the legislation of the Member States of the WHO European Region

	TYPE AND TOPIC OF MESSAGE	MESSAGE CONTENT	MEMBER STATE
WRITTEN MESSAGES	General harm to health	Drinking alcohol causes liver disease	Ireland (starting from 2026)
		There is direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers	Ireland (starting from 2026)
		Alcoholic beverages are harmful to your health	Turkmenistan
	Harms of excessive use or abuse	Warning: Excessive consumption of alcohol is life threatening and is detrimental to health	Israel
		Warning: Contains alcohol – it is recommended to refrain from excessive consumption	Israel
		Excessive use of alcohol is harmful to your health	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation*
		Alcohol abuse leads to severe diseases of internal organs and nervous system	Uzbekistan
	Harm to specific groups (underage, pregnancy, driving, other specific groups)	Distribution to persons under the age of 18 prohibited § 9 Youth Protection Act	Germany (applies to alcopops only)
		Do not offer alcohol to minors	Republic of Moldova
		Consumption of alcohol beverages during pregnancy, even in small amounts, can have serious consequences for the child's health	France
		Alcohol may harm the unborn child	Republic of Moldova
		Alcohol slows down reaction speed – do not drink and drive	Republic of Moldova
		Alcohol use is not recommended for persons under the age of 18, pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well as persons with diseases of the nervous system and internal organs	Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation*
		Alcohol use is not recommended for persons under the age of 18, pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well as persons with diseases of the nervous system and internal organs	Kazakhstan*
	Other	Alcohol is not your friend	Türkiye
PICTOGRAMS	Pregnancy		France, Ireland (starting from 2026), Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Türkiye
	Underage		Republic of Moldova, Türkiye
	Driving		Republic of Moldova, Türkiye

* Member States of the Eurasian Economic Union, where the Technical Regulation “On the Safety of Alcoholic Beverages” (TR EEU 047/2018) will come into force starting from July 2024, but labels are already broadly used as part of a transition period. Health warning messages for Kazakhstan varies due to the minimum drinking age of 21 years of the country as opposed to 18 years in the other four Member States³.

What are examples of other health warnings labels across the world?



In **Australia** and **New Zealand**, pregnancy warning labels on alcoholic beverages were introduced in July 2020 with a three-year transition period ending in July 2023 and after an even longer period of self-regulation. Optional alternative requirements for pregnancy warning labels for corrugated cardboard outer packaging were also introduced on 4 May 2023. Regulations include minimum size and pictogram diameter (6).



In **South Africa** health warnings on alcohol labels have been legally required since August 2007 (7). The health warning needs to be visible and not affected by any other matter, on a devoted space and at least 1/8 of the total label size, be in black on white background and contain one of the defined messages:

- Alcohol reduces driving ability, don't drink and drive.
- Don't drink and walk on the road, you may be killed.
- Alcohol increases your risk to personal injuries.
- Alcohol is a major cause of violence and crime.
- Alcohol abuse is dangerous to your health.
- Alcohol is addictive.



The mandatory health warnings implemented in **Chile** in 2023 require all alcoholic beverages to feature a message "harmful alcohol use damages your health"(8) The message has to be accompanied by octagonal black and white pictograms with specific warnings related to drinking and driving, alcohol consumption during pregnancy, and underage drinking. These warnings must occupy a minimum of 15% of the label surface.

Health warnings on alcohol labels are an impactful strategy for potential risks of alcohol use, increase awareness of alcohol-related harms and can contribute to the denormalization of alcohol use, promoting public health. However, the impact of health warnings depends on design, content and placing on the labels. The current lack of implementation and standardization of health warnings labels leave consumers without critical information to make informed decisions.

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