

CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION



Food and Agriculture
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World Health
Organization

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STANDARDIZATION FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IN CODEX

(Prepared by WHO)

Health impact of alcohol consumption and WHO Global Strategy to reduce harmful use of alcohol

1. Alcoholic beverages and their use are deeply embedded in cultural norms and are legal and tradable commodities in most countries. Alcoholic beverages contain ethanol, which is a psychoactive and toxic substance with dependence producing propensity. Worldwide, it is estimated that 3.3 million deaths every year result from harmful use of alcohol, this represent 5.9 % of all deaths. Overall 5.1 % of the global burden of disease and injury is attributable to alcohol, as measured in disability- adjusted life years (DALYs). Harmful use of alcohol is associated with numerous social consequences, such as crimes, violence, unemployment and absenteeism, and generates a significant social and economic burden.

2. WHO aims to reduce the health burden caused by the harmful use of alcohol and, thereby, to save lives, prevent injuries and diseases and improve the well-being of individuals, communities and society at large. The WHO Global strategy to reduce harmful use of alcohol¹, adopted by the 63rd World Health Assembly, represents a collective commitment by WHO Member States to reduce the health and social burden caused by harmful use of alcohol. The concept of the harmful use of alcohol is broad and encompasses the drinking that causes detrimental health and social consequences for the drinker, the people around the drinker and society at large, as well as the patterns of drinking that are associated with increased risk of adverse health outcomes.

Existing Codex Work related to alcoholic beverages

3. Codex has developed standards for additives and codes of practice to reduce contaminants in alcoholic beverages. Codex has also set labeling provisions for all pre-packaged foods, as well as guidance on nutrition and health claims which also apply to alcoholic beverages though they are not explicitly mentioned.

4. Codex has however never set a commodity standard for an alcoholic beverage. The new work proposal from the Republic of Korea (if approved, developed and adopted) would therefore set a precedence for future Codex standards for alcoholic beverages.

Considerations and principles for possible Codex standards for alcoholic beverages

5. One of the primary objectives of the Codex standards is protection of health. Protection of populations at high risk of alcohol-attributable harm and those exposed to the effects of harmful drinking by others should thus be an integral part of any Codex standard setting work related to alcoholic beverages.

6. Consumers of alcoholic beverages should have the right to know the health risks associated with the product consumption, the different ingredients in the beverage, its alcoholic strength and content and how many calories they are consuming.

7. Keeping in mind ethanol's psychoactive, toxic and dependence producing propensities, no nutrition or health claims should be allowed as there should be no rationale whatsoever to recommend drinking alcohol as prevention intervention nor promote alcoholic beverage for health purposes, also due to other ingredients it may contain.

Proposed way forward

8. To take into account the above the Commission could develop specific labelling provisions to be included in the future Codex standards on alcoholic beverages to reduce harmful use of alcohol and its impact on health of individuals and populations.

9. This could best be done in a horizontal approach. In particular, new work can be undertaken by the Codex Committee on Food Labelling with regards to alcoholic beverages, addressing a claim for “alcohol-free” product, labelling for alcoholic content and energy value, a generic public health warning, restrictions on nutrition and health claims, and possibly advertising (as relevant). These provisions would apply to all alcoholic beverages whether they have been standardized by Codex or not.

10. The new work in CCASIA on Makgeolli and in CCFL could be undertaken in parallel. Once the relevant work has been completed, future Codex commodity standards on alcoholic beverages would contain, in their Labelling section, a reference to the new provisions in the *General Standard for the Labelling of Pre-packaged Foods* (CODEX STAN 1-1985) as well as a reference to the WHO strategy and guidelines in their scope section.

11. Comparable approaches have already been taken in the Codex Standard for Infant Formula and Formulas for Special Medical Purposes Intended for Infants (CODEX STAN 72-1981) – marketing provisions – and in the Codex Standard for Natural Mineral Waters (CODEX STAN 108-1981) – warning on high fluoride content products - and may be taken in a future Codex standard for kava drinks should Codex decide to develop such a standard.

12. WHO is prepared to present a project document for the above-mentioned new work on labelling of alcoholic beverages to the 73rd Session of the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (June 2017). CCASIA is invited to support this initiative which will also benefit the intentions of the proposal for the regional standard for Makgeolli.

¹ http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/activities/gsrhua/en/