

# What Is a Drink? Communicating Drink Information to the Consumer

May 2015

## National Alcohol Strategy

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# What Is a Drink? Communicating Drink Information to the Consumer

This document was published by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA).

Suggested citation: National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee. (2015). What is a Drink? Communicating Drink Information to the Consumer. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

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Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

This document can also be downloaded as a PDF at [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca)

Ce document est également disponible en français sous le titre :

*La notion de « verre » : Informer le consommateur sur le verre d'alcool*

ISBN 978-1-77178-241-8

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## Acknowledgements

Drafts of this report were developed by a Working Group of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee (NASAC). Working Group members represent expertise in alcohol beverage policy, research, health literacy, manufacturing and consumer marketing. Members of NASAC commented on drafts and accepted this final report. NASAC members' leadership and collaborative approach continue to be invaluable to implementing recommendations from the National Alcohol Strategy.

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# An Introduction to Drink Labelling

## 1.1 What Constitutes a Drink Label?

A drink label is a direct way of communicating drink information to the consumer. Drink labelling involves labelling alcohol beverage containers with information on the number of drinks specific to that particular product, taking into account the percentage of alcohol by volume and the volume of the container. This information is commonly conveyed by the use of a logo, text or combination thereof that identifies the number of drinks in the container of beer, wine, spirits or other beverage type.

## 1.2 Summary of the Evidence

### 1.2.1 Food and Nutrition Labelling

Evidence on food labelling indicates that the use of nutrition labels among the general population is typically above 50% (Health Canada, 2010; Campos, Doxey, & Hammond, 2011); however, observational studies suggest that self-reported data on nutrition label use might be inflated (Grunert, Fernández-Clemenin, Wills, genannt Bonsmann, & Nureeva, 2010). Food label use is higher amongst certain subgroups of the population, including women (Health Canada, 2010; Campos et al., 2011), those with higher self-proclaimed knowledge of nutrition (Health Canada, 2010; Campos et al., 2011), those with higher education and income (Vanderlee, Goodman, Sae Yang, & Hammond, 2012), middle aged or younger adults, and consumers who place less emphasis on price. Use is particularly high among individuals with health conditions and those with the greatest need for nutritional information (Campos et al., 2011).

The evidence shows a consistent link between the use of nutrition labels and healthier diets, but the causal nature of this relationship is likely bidirectional (Campos et al., 2011). Labels were not effective when consumers were choosing their preferred products, but did influence choice when participants were asked to make a healthful choice (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2013). Taste, price, convenience, preferences and habit can take priority over health when choosing foods (Health Canada, 2010; Health Canada, 2007). There is a broad consensus that nutrition information should be provided on a wider range of food products (genannt Bonsmann & Wills, 2012), including alcoholic beverages (The Strategic Counsel, 2011).

Canadians who perceive the nutrition lists as unregulated or who do not understand information provided on the label perceive it to be untrustworthy information (Health Canada, 2010; Health Canada, 2007). Even though many Canadian consumers place high importance on nutritional content in making food choices, only about one-third say they can easily understand the various label components (The Strategic Counsel, 2012). Many consumers have difficulty with the quantitative information presented on labels (The Strategic Counsel, 2011; Campos et al., 2011) and find labels that require calculations confusing (Campos et al., 2011). Instructive educational campaigns in conjunction with point-of-purchase information can help raise awareness and understanding of nutrition labels, and the motivation to use them (The Strategic Counsel, 2012; genannt Bonsmann & Wills, 2012).

### 1.2.2 Standard Drink Labelling

Individuals' understanding of the concept of standard drinks, their use of the concept and their drinking practices (i.e., actual servings poured), most often diverge substantially from official definitions (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008; De Visser & Birch, 2012). These findings are consistent



across various subgroups and jurisdictions (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008; Pulford, McCormick, Wheeler, Firkin, & Robinson, 2007; Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education [FARE], 2012, Dowling, Clark, & Corney, 2006). In Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), where some form of standard drink labelling has been implemented, the majority (> 50%) of people are aware of the concept of a standard drink, but specific knowledge as to what actually constitutes a standard drink is low (Hawks, 1999; Lader & Steel, 2010; De Visser & Birch, 2012; FARE, 2012). A recent Canadian survey indicates that approximately 35% of respondents had heard of the term “standard drink” (Osioy, Stockwell, & Zhao, 2013; Osioy, Stockwell, Zhao, Thompson, & Moore, 2015).

Knowledge of standard drinks is different for the different beverage types (Dowling et al., 2006; FARE, 2012; Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008). Drinkers who are aware of the concept of a standard drink are typically more aware of the standard drink definition for beer and spirits, when the definition corresponds with the common serving size, than they are for wine (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008; Hawks, 1999; Kerr & Stockwell, 2011; FARE, 2012). In 1995, Australia implemented mandatory standard drink labels (SDLs) on all packaged alcohol products. The 2012 FARE *Annual Alcohol Poll* indicates that when asked to freely recall the number of standard drinks in a given container of alcohol, Australian drinkers are largely unaware of the answer:

Even when considering a correct answer as being within 10% of the number of standard drinks in a product, over two thirds of Australian drinkers (66%) underestimate the number of standard drinks in a 750 ml bottle of red wine, 47% underestimated the number of standard drinks in a 4 Litre cask of white wine, 31% underestimate the number of standard drinks in a 700 ml bottle of spirits and 27% underestimate the number of standard drinks in a full strength beer. (FARE, 2012).

There is a strong tendency to over-pour drinks and underestimate the alcohol content of beverages (De Visser & Birch, 2012). Actual servings poured show large variations within and across beverage types (Kaskutas & Graves, 2000), by drinking context (Kerr & Stockwell, 2011), by drinking pattern (De Visser & Birch, 2012) and when conditions were not standard (i.e., when the container size and/or beverage strength did not correspond with the official norms) (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008; Kerr & Stockwell, 2011; Osioy et al., 2013, 2015). Experience pouring drinks and increased attention to the serving decreased over-pouring but did not eliminate it (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008; Wansink & Ittersum, 2005).

SDLs have been shown to improve the ability to accurately define and pour a standard drink and have been associated with increased awareness of the concept of a standard drink. When presented with a symbol indicating national recommendations, standard drink information is typically considered by consumers to be significantly more useful than percentage of alcohol by volume labelling information (Hawks, 1999). Beer and wine containers labelled with the number of standard drinks per container, as opposed to the percentage of alcohol by volume, lead to a significant decrease in the degree to which drinkers underestimate the alcohol content of the respective containers (Stockwell, Blaze-Temple, & Walker, 1991; Osioy et al., 2013, 2015). Many methods of indicating alcohol content (original gravity, original proof) require formulas to determine the number of standard drinks in the container (Stockwell & Honig, 1990). These computations can deter even those interested in tracking their adherence to national guidelines (Kerr & Stockwell, 2011).

Survey and focus group research suggests that standard drink information provided on alcohol containers can be used by consumers in several ways, including: to track personal consumption to adhere to the low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines (LRDGs); to track alcohol consumption in certain contexts (e.g., for medical reasons), or, by some consumers, to identify stronger and more cost effective products (Osioy et al., 2013, 2015; Jones & Gregory, 2009).



Evidence also indicates that there are individual differences among consumers as well as differences having to do with specific beverages that can affect the digestion and absorption of alcohol. Communicating standard drink information facilitates the monitoring of personal alcohol consumption and provides the basis for low-risk drinking advice within a clinical setting.

To date, there has been limited evaluation of the implementation and impact of SDLs. There is no evidence to indicate that the implementation of SDLs leads to a significant change in high-risk drinking behaviours. Alcohol labels are an opportunity for impact to evolve over time. Existing low awareness of the health consequences of alcohol and the low-risk drinking guidelines suggests that behaviour change around alcohol consumption will take time (Eurocare, 2011). The evidence suggests that SDLs should be part of a wide-ranging national strategy on alcohol, such as the NAS, and supported by a comprehensive (Martin-Moreno et al., 2013) and integrated education campaign to ensure consumers know how to make use of the information provided on the labels (Hawks, 1999; Stockwell & Honig, 1990).

## 1.3 International Examples of Drink Labelling

### 1.3.1 Australian and New Zealand Standard Drink Labelling

The requirements for SDLs in Australia apply to beverages or food capable of being consumed as a beverage, where the alcohol by volume is more than 0.5%. In Australia, a “standard drink” is the amount of a beverage that contains ten grams of alcohol at 20 degrees Celsius. The label on the package of an alcoholic beverage that was packaged after December 20, 2002, must include a statement of the number of standard drinks in the package. Where the package contains ten or less standard drinks, this statement must be accurate to the first decimal place. Where the package contains more than ten standard drinks, this statement must be accurate to the nearest whole number of standard drinks (Food Standards Australia New Zealand, 2014). Figure 1 depicts the logos developed by industry in 2006 and endorsed by the Australian government. The logos are intended to make it easier for consumers to identify the number of standard drinks and their use is voluntary.

Figure 1: Australian Voluntary Standard Drink Logos

Beer	Spirit	Wine
		

Source: Office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing, New South Wales Government, 2014  
Reproduced with permission, Department of Health, Australia

### 1.3.2 England Public Health Responsibility Deal: Alcohol Pledges

In England, the Public Health Responsibility Deal includes a collection of alcohol pledges that support the core commitment to foster a culture of responsible drinking and that will help people to drink within guidelines. The first three alcohol pledges relate to providing the consumer with information on alcohol units. The first pledge is to ensure that over 80% of products on the shelf in England by December 2013 have labels with clear unit content, National Health Service (NHS)



guidelines and a warning about drinking when pregnant. The second and third pledges are to provide simple and consistent information in on-trade (e.g. pubs and clubs) and, as appropriate, the off-trade establishments, to raise awareness of alcohol units, the unit content of alcoholic drinks, NHS drinking guidelines, and the health harms associated with exceeding guidelines.

Unit labelling is not mandatory in England, but some companies (97 signatories as of the fiscal year 2011–2012) have chosen to label their products to help consumers assess their alcohol consumption. The Portman Group has developed guidelines that describe the standardized format most of these companies follow, but because the guidelines are voluntary a company can choose to label its products in a different format. The guidelines are intended to promote a consistent format to assist consumers in recognizing and understanding the information being provided.

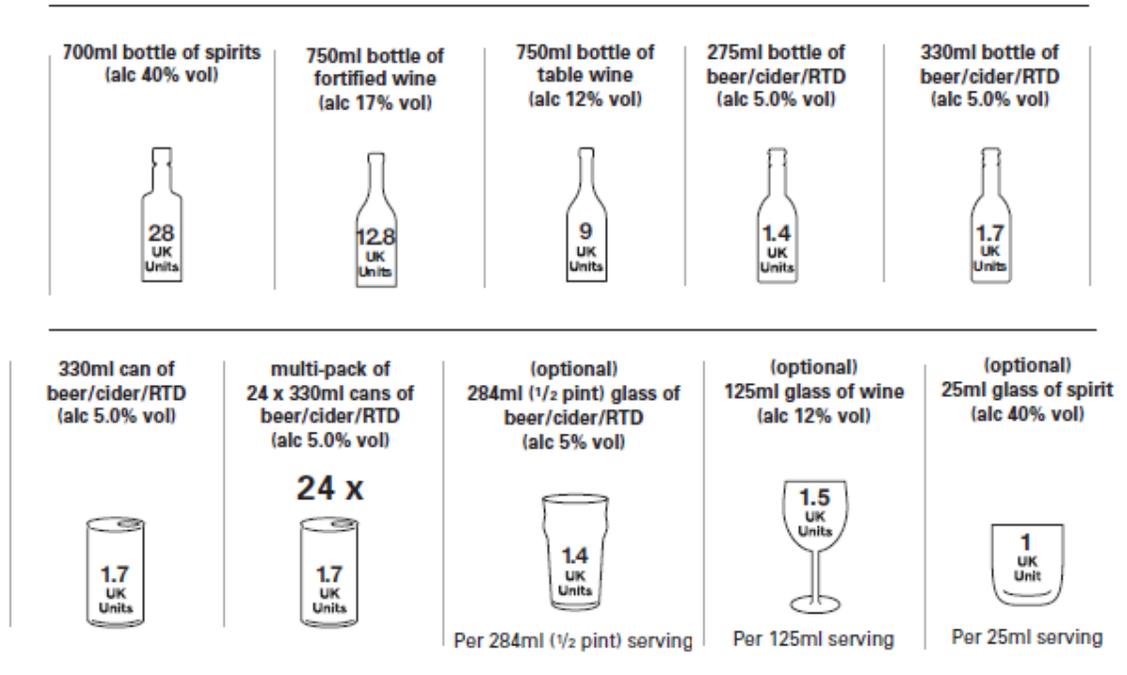
The Portman Guidelines are as follows:

- The number of units should be calculated for the whole container.
- In the case of a multi-serving container, the number of units per typical serving may additionally be displayed if desired.
- The number of units should normally be rounded to one decimal place.
- The number of units should be stated with the suffix “UK Units” and displayed within an appropriate icon (see Figure 2a and 2b).
- If the number of units in a typical serving has additionally been displayed (see above), the size of the typical serving should be stated (i.e., 125 ml, 25 ml or 284 ml [1/2 pint]).
- The icon should be of sufficient size that the text in it is easily legible.
- No other writing or visual should be used in conjunction with the unit information.
- On the outer packaging of retailed multi-packs, the individual container icon should be displayed, followed (or prefixed) by an indication of the number of containers within the pack.
- The icons can be in any appropriate colour to ensure clarity.

(Portman Group, 2007)

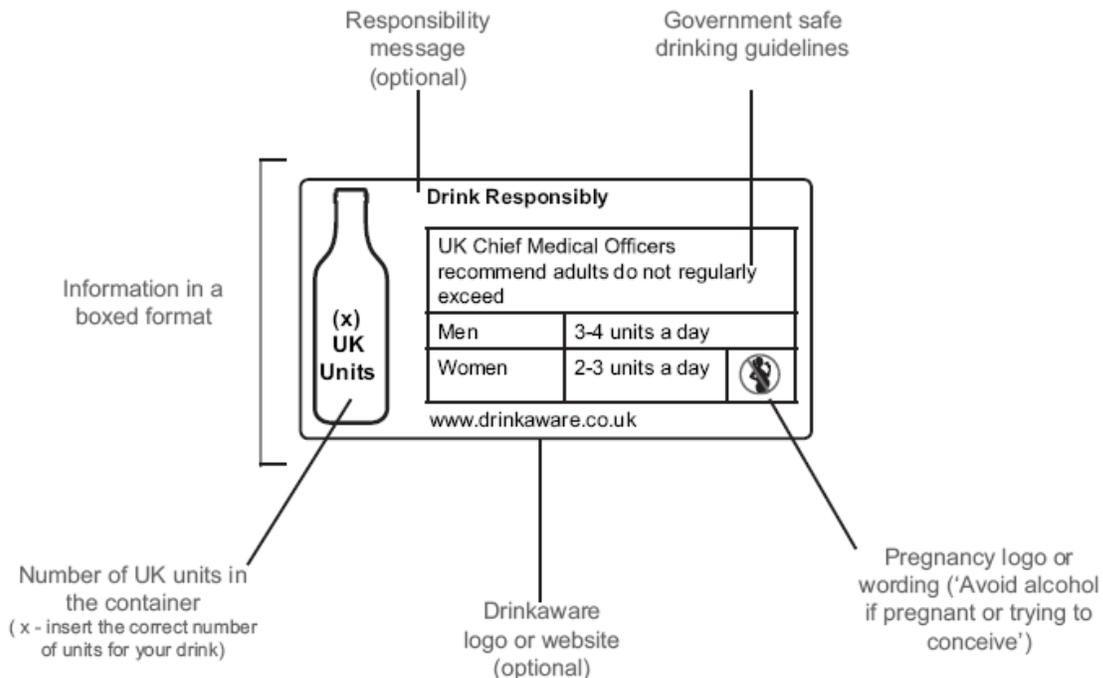


Figure 2a: England Alcohol Unit Label Prototypes



Source: Portman Group, 2007  
Reproduced with permission, © Portman Group

Figure 2b: Format of Alcohol Beverage Label



Source: UK Science and Technology Committee, 2012  
Reproduced with permission, © Portman Group



# How Do Drink Labels Fit into a Broader Culture of Moderation

## 2.1 The Relevance of Drink Labels to the Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines

Communicating standard drink information helps in monitoring personal alcohol consumption. Lack of knowledge about standard drinks can preclude people from engaging in responsible drinking practices, even if they are aware of drinking guidelines and motivated to monitor and regulate their alcohol consumption (Dowling et al., 2006; Hawks, 1999; De Visser & Birch, 2012). The majority of Australian alcohol consumers said they would be likely or highly likely to use standard drink information on labels to measure or regulate their drinking (Hawks, 1999). A pilot study in the UK found that 25% of female respondents and 19% of male respondents used the unit system to monitor their drinking (Gill, 2006). Further research indicates that between 13 % and 29% of drinkers who had heard of alcohol units said they kept track of the number of units they drank (Lader & Steel, 2010; Stockwell & Honig, 1990).

## 2.2 The Relevance of Drink Labels to Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral

Communicating standard drink information helps in monitoring personal alcohol consumption and provides the basis for low-risk drinking advice within a clinical setting (Eurocare, 2011). The need for this standard drink information is of particular importance for high-risk groups. For example, accuracy in estimating drink sizes is of great urgency among pregnant women at risk for fetal alcohol syndrome and a key aspect of monitoring alcohol intake (Kaskutas & Graves, 2000). In the UK, heavier drinkers were slightly more likely to track their drinking using alcohol units than lighter drinkers (Lader & Steel, 2010).

## 2.3 The Relevance of Drink Labels to Other National Alcohol Strategy Recommendations

There is clear evidence that the ability of most drinkers to monitor their consumption is compromised with present labelling (i.e., percentage of alcohol by volume). SDLs can help consumers to overcome the challenge of accurately monitoring their consumption in terms of standard drinks. While Canada has a robust matrix of policies governing alcohol, drink labels can support a culture of moderation by supplementing other interventions of proven effectiveness that require the monitoring of personal alcohol intake. For example, drink information can also influence consumers' decisions about whether or not to drive or engage in other behaviors that might be affected by drinking (ICAP, 2008, Gill, 2006). SDLs can also help facilitate the monitoring and understanding of alcohol harms by increasing the accuracy of consumption estimates.



# What Supports and Conditions Need to Accompany a Drink Label for Optimal Uptake?

## 3.1 Education and Awareness Campaign

The research recommends that standard drink information be accompanied by a comprehensive national education campaign featuring standard drinks (Hawks, 1999; Stockwell & Honig, 1990). An instructive parallel educational campaign should provide information to help consumers understand drink information on alcohol labels so they can effectively make use of this information.

## 3.2 Direct, Clear and Consistent Advice

Drink information needs to be communicated to the consumer in a manner that is direct and easily accessible. Providing drink information on alcohol containers provides this information to the consumer in-store at the point of purchase and can serve as a reminder at the point of actual consumption, the pour. The drink information should be clearly communicated to the consumer. A pictogram or supportive text or both can be used to simply communicate drink information to the consumer. Finally, drink information should be communicated consistently across initiatives such as the low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines, initiatives to counter drinking and driving, and screening, brief intervention and referral tools and activities.

## 3.3 Evaluation

There are very few evaluations of the effectiveness of SDLs. None of the work to date is conclusive and evidence on SDLs in the Canadian context is lacking. The only Canadian data available is from Quebec (Éduc'alcool-CROP, 2014) and British Columbia (Osioy et al. 2013; 2015), as well as ongoing work by Public Health Ontario. Data from Éduc'alcool indicates that more than seven out of ten Quebecers (over 80% of those under 25 years of age) said that a label indicating the number of standard drinks in every bottle or container would be helpful (36%) or very helpful (35%). Experimental data from British Columbia indicates that the addition of visible SDLs helps consumers make more accurate estimates of the standard drink content of their usual beverages than do percentage of alcohol by volume labels alone. Yet this evidence cannot be considered as conclusive nor can it allow us to presume the effectiveness of SDLs. There is a need for precise and relevant evidence on the effects of SDLs in our local context.

A comprehensive pilot project should be put in place in at least two provinces or territories and, depending on the feasibility, labels should be tested on at least two brands of each beer, wine and spirits. A quantitative analysis should follow after a one-year pilot period.

### 1.3.1 Evaluation Indicators

The quantitative research should focus on precise indications of the awareness, understanding, impact, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the consumers who would have been exposed to the SDLs.



## 4. Recommendations for the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee

The Canadian Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines (LRDGs) define a “drink” as 17.05 mL or 13.45 g of ethanol. To promote consistency with the Canadian LRDGs, for the purposes of these recommendations, a “drink” will be defined according to the LRDGs.

### 4.1 Drink Labelling and Consumer Education

Raising awareness of personal drinking practices and the LRDGs are necessary conditions for achieving a culture of moderation. Beverage alcohol producers are all encouraged to develop communication tools and materials to better equip consumers to make informed drinking choices, on a variety of communication platforms, which could include drink labels and parallel educational initiatives to help consumers understand the drink information provided on the beverage container.

### 4.2 Drink Labels

Voluntary drink labelling must adhere to all federal beverage alcohol labelling rules. The following offers guidance to beverage alcohol producers that choose to voluntarily label the number of drinks in a container.

The serving size of a drink should be based on Canada’s LRDG definition of a drink, developed on behalf of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee, which defines a “drink” as equivalent to 17.05 mL or 13.45 g of ethanol and corresponds approximately to:

- 142 mL for wine at 12% alc./vol.
- 341 mL for beers, ciders, coolers at 5% alc./vol.
- 43 mL for spirits at 40% alc./vol.

The calculation to define the number of drinks in a container is:

$$\left[ \frac{\text{Container volume (mL)} \times \text{Alcohol by Volume (\%)}}{17.05 \text{ mL}} \right] / 100 = \text{Number of drinks}$$

In accordance with federal labelling regulations, all beverage alcohol containers must be labelled with net quantity and the alcohol content by volume expressed in percentage terms. Beverage alcohol producers interested in voluntarily labelling the number of drinks in a container should follow these recommendations:

- The number of drinks in a container must be rounded to one decimal place;<sup>1,2</sup>.
- If using a written statement, the format must be “contains / content: X.X drinks / verres” or “X.X drinks / verres”;

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Association of Liquor Jurisdictions rules on tolerances for distinguishing between labelled alcohol by volume and actual alcohol by volume also apply to voluntary SDL: beer, ±0.5%; wine ±1.0%; spirits ±0.3%.

<sup>2</sup> Brewers should be aware that the SDL in some situations will cut across more than one qualified common name. For example, a 341 ml beer could be 1.1 drinks, but labelled as either “beer” or “strong beer” depending on the alc. / vol.



- If using a pictogram,<sup>3</sup> it must also include the written statement “contains X.X drinks / contient X,X verres” or “X.X drinks / X,X verres”;
- At a minimum, the drinks statement/pictogram must be readily visible to the consumer under the customary conditions of purchase and use as specified in the *Food and Drug Regulations*<sup>4</sup> and should be located in close proximity to the alc./vol information on the label;
- The drinks statement/pictogram must not contradict requirements under the Product Identification Standards defined by the Canadian Association of Liquor Jurisdictions (2004);
- The drinks statement/pictogram must not contradict requirements under the *Food and Drugs Act Regulations* or the *Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act Regulations*; and
- The drinks statement/pictogram must be informative and not be implemented in such a way that would direct consumers towards beverage alcohol products of higher alcohol content.

### 4.3 Consumer Education

Education provides the preferred means to explain drink information to consumers. Industry and other stakeholders are encouraged to develop educational initiatives that would help consumers better understand drink information. These initiatives could include, but are not limited to:

- Developing provincial campaigns to promote Canada’s LRDGs.
- Creating a voluntary QR Code label design to engage the consumer experience by directing them to low-risk drinking guideline drink information and educational materials in support of LRDG;
- Printing educational materials on reference drink sizes across beverage categories; and
- Developing user-friendly websites to support the LRDGs and other educational materials.

#### QR Codes

With over half of Canadian adults (56%) using a smart phone (Google, 2013), they have high expectations for accessing quality information online and on demand. The use of a QR code can provide consumers with an engaging interface for information on determining what constitutes a drink, as well as other relevant information, such as the LRDGs. As QR codes are visual images, they work well on bilingual packaging.



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<sup>3</sup> For consistency, the Australian pictogram is a suggested format using the definition of a drink in Canada’s LRDGs.

<sup>4</sup> A.01.016. All information required by these Regulations to appear on a label of a food or drug shall be (a) clearly and prominently displayed on the label; and (b) readily discernible to the purchaser or consumer under the customary conditions of purchase and use.



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