

Sugar content of ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages



“Apart from the  in the morning, the  and  throughout the day, the  I have with lunch and the  in the evening, I never ever touch sugar.”

A mere seven teaspoons of sugar a day can be harmful to health. Yet you could easily consume more than that in your drinks by lunchtime. So apart from the fact we need brands to reduce their sugar content, clearer labelling and a wider public understanding of the dangers of excess sugar, everything's fine.

SUGAR AWARENESS WEEK 20TH - 26TH JANUARY 2020

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Background

Sugar

Excessive sugar consumption contributes to overweight and obesity and related health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, various cancers and tooth decay. The wider costs to society of obesity are estimated to be as high as £27 billion (1), with one in three adults and one in five children being obese in the UK (2). The cost to the NHS of treating oral conditions is about £3.4 billion per year (3).

Alcohol

In 2017 in Great Britain, data from a report by Alcohol Change UK found an estimated 29.2 million adults (57% of the population) drank alcohol in the week before being surveyed, and around 10% drank on five or more days (4). Although 16-24 year olds are less likely to have drunk alcohol in the past week, when they do drink, they are more likely to drink at high levels (4). In addition:

- Data from NHS England shows that in 2018, almost half of 15 year olds thought it was ok to drink alcohol once a week and a worrying one in five (19%) of 15 year olds thought it was okay to get drunk once a week (5).
- In 2009/10 in Wales, 17% of males and 14% of females aged 11-16 reported drinking alcohol at least once a week (6).
- In 2018 in Scotland, 71% of 15 year olds and 36% of 13 year olds reported ever having had an alcoholic drink, but fell to 20% and 6% respectively for those who drank alcohol in the last week (7).

Aside from the health risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption itself (8), alcohol itself contains seven calories per gram, and many alcoholic drinks contain added sugar and contribute further to calorie intake. Sugar in these drinks carries the same health risks as sugar in any other food or drink, which costs the NHS billions (1) and shortens lives.

Ready-to-drink alcoholic drinks

Many alcoholic drinks, such as fortified wines, sherries, liqueurs and cider contain added sugar, plus many spirits are mixed with sugary soft drinks. There has been a notable rise in the number of pre-mixed, often fruit flavoured and spirit based alcoholic soft drinks and pre-mixed cocktails on the UK market. These products are referred to in the trade as alcohol-based RTD (ready to drink) which describes any drink featuring an alcoholic drink and a mixer sold pre-mixed typically either in bottles or cans (9). These drinks encourage a 'grab and go' culture, similar to cans and bottles of soft drinks, making drinking alone and 'on the go' more acceptable. According to Mintel, there is a high level of interest in RTD 'trendy' cocktails among the younger generation and an opportunity to increase sales in response (9). Data from Nielsen shows that these drinks have shown faster growth than beer, wine, cider and spirits off-trade. RTDs are generating around £280m in sales for retailers and growing at 16.3% (52 weeks ending 1st Dec 2018) (10).

Policies to Help Lower Sugar Consumption

Sugar-sweetened alcoholic drinks have so far completely avoided scrutiny. Government currently has three policies in place to help reduce sugar intake across the UK population and to tackle obesity – the voluntary Sugar Reduction Programme, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy and voluntary front of pack nutrition labelling.

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Sugar Reduction Programme

As part of their plan to reduce childhood obesity in the UK, government introduced a sugar reduction programme, managed by Public Health England, in 2016 (11). The programme challenges the food industry to reduce the overall sugar content of the food products that contribute the most sugar to children's intakes by 20% by 2020, compared to sugar levels in the foods in 2015. This includes products such as breakfast cereals, yogurts, cakes and milk-based drinks. Therefore, despite their high sugar content, alcoholic drinks are excluded from the sugar reduction programme due to its focus on children's diets.

The programme is having mixed results, with manufactures and retailers only having reduced their sugar levels by an average of 2.9% since 2015 (12).

Soft Drinks Industry Levy

In 2018, HM Treasury implemented a Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL), applied to the production and importation of soft drinks containing added sugar (13). A primary aim of the levy is to encourage manufacturers to reformulate their products and reduce the sugar content, to contribute to the government's aim of reducing childhood obesity in the UK. The SDIL covers:

- drinks with sugar added during production, or anything that contains sugar, such as honey
- drinks with at least 5g sugar per 100ml in their ready to drink or diluted form
- drinks that are either ready to drink, or to be drunk it must be diluted with water/mixed with crushed ice/mixed with carbon dioxide/a combination of these
- bottled or canned drinks, or packaged so that its ready to drink
- drinks with an alcohol content of 1.2% alcohol by volume (ABV) or less

Ready-to-drink alcoholic drinks are not subject to the SDIL, despite their sugar content, as they have an alcohol content of more than 1.2% ABV.

The Levy has been much more successful, with 28.8% sugar reduction per 100ml, removing 30,000 tonnes of sugar from the UK diet, and raising £340m from the manufacturers, not individuals, to spend on improving children's health (12).

Nutrition Labelling

The government has voluntary guidance, managed by the Department of Health and Social Care, on front of pack nutrition labels for food and drinks (14). However there is currently no mandatory requirement to display nutritional information on alcoholic drinks products. An EU regulation (1169/2011) states that alcoholic beverages with more than 1.2% ABV are exempt from having a nutrition declaration or mandatory list of ingredients (unless they make a claim to be 'diet/light') (15). Recent research by Panorama highlighted that many alcoholic products do not even display the correct unit guidance of 14 units per week (16).

Industry Body the Portman Group provides best practice guidance on communicating alcohol and health-related information to consumers for its members. The guidance does not include the provision of nutritional information as a required element of health information to be displayed on-pack. They established the charity 'DrinkAware' to inform the public of the health impacts of overconsumption of alcohol. Consequently, Public Health England's collaboration with DrinkAware has been widely criticized by campaigners who have long been calling for regulations, including nutrition labelling, on alcoholic drinks (17).

Additional Policies

Government proposed a range of measures as part of their Childhood Obesity Plan, chapters one and two, which would help reduce sugar and calorie intake in the UK (18, 19). These include:

- Restrictions on the marketing and advertising, including a potential 9pm watershed, for all products high in sugar, salt and fat (HFSS)
- A ban on price and location promotions for all HFSS products
- Extension of the SDIL to milk-based drinks
- A ban on the sale of energy drinks, which contain excessive levels of sugar and caffeine, to children
- A calorie reduction programme, which would have a similar structure to the sugar reduction programme
- Mandatory calorie labelling on menus in the out of home (OOH) sector

While many of these proposals have been consulted on, no further action has been decided or taken.

Sugar Awareness Week 2020 Survey

In order to establish the sugar and calorie content of ready-to-drink alcoholic drinks and to inform policy makers on the potential measures to reduce the health impact of these products, Action on Sugar undertook a comprehensive review of all ready-to-drink alcoholic drinks sold at major UK retailers.

Method

Action on Sugar collected product information for 202 'ready to drink' alcoholic beverages in the weeks commencing 26th August and 2nd September 2019.

An initial online search returned 48 products from Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Waitrose & Partners and Iceland websites. A further search in store returned 154 products, using the 'FoodSwitch' app to collect data from the following retailers - Aldi, Asda, The Co-operative, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose & Partners and B&M.

Nutrition information was sourced on-pack (in-store) and from manufacturers or retailer's websites. Where it was not possible to ascertain information on sugar content, Action on Sugar commissioned independent laboratory analysis of 21 products. Products were selected for analysis to ensure a range of products were included in the survey and to highlight variation in sugar content in similar products, to prove that reformulation can be easily achieved.

These products were purchased, paid for and delivered to independent Public Analysts for analysis of sugar content. The results from the Public Analysts are available on request. Drinks were analysed at Kent Scientific Services, 8 Abbey Wood Road, Kings Hill, Kent, ME19 4YT. Where nutrition information per can/bottle is not available we have calculated using the 100ml data and the pack size.

Survey Results



Labelling

Nine out of 10 pre-mixed spirits don't even have sugar information on the reverse of the packaging, so consumers are unaware of the very large amounts they are drinking. Food and (soft) drinks on supermarket shelves carry nutrition information on the reverse of product packaging. Responsible companies also voluntarily carry colour-coded nutrition information on the front of the packaging, so customers can see at a glance what is in their food and drink, how much it contributes to their daily intakes, and make an informed, healthy choice.

Where available, we collected pre-existing data on calorie and sugar content from product packaging in supermarkets, as this is information provided at 'point of purchase', and is the only genuine way of providing customer choice. Out of the 154 products collected in-store, nutrition information on pack was shockingly low making it incredibly difficult for consumers to know exactly what they are drinking:

- Only 63 products (41%) had some form of nutrition information on pack
- Just 14 products (9%) had 'sugar' information on pack

We also found discrepancies with portion sizes, with pack sizes varying from 200ml to 700ml, and some manufacturers even suggesting that 1 small 250ml can would contain 2 portions. The lack of consistency in portion sizes across these drinks and many other products creates confusion and incorrect assumptions of suitable portion sizes for consumers.

Variation in sugar levels

Despite the lack of nutrition labelling, we were able to obtain sufficient data in our survey to reveal a huge variation in the sugar content of ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages. This clearly demonstrates that it is possible to make these drinks with less sugar. If some more responsible companies can achieve this then all companies should aim to follow that example. In the tables below we have highlighted the most and least sugary products in each category surveyed.

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Traditional premixed cocktails

Table 1 showing the 3 highest and 3 lowest in sugar beverages per pack

Product Name	Pack size (ml)	ABV (%)	Calories per pack (kcal)	Sugars per pack (g)	Teaspoons of sugar per pack
TGI Fridays Passion Fruit Martini**	500	10.0	325	49.1	12
TGI Fridays Pink Punk Mojito**	500	10.0	330	46.7	12
Tesco Strawberry Daiquiri Alcoholic Frozen Sorbet***	250	4.0	228	36	9
Funkin Nitro Cocktails Passion Fruit Martini**	200	5.0	N/A	16.7	4
All Shook Up Espresso Martini**	250	4.5	N/A	16.5	4
House Of Cocktails Strawberry Daiquiri**	250	4.0	N/A	12.6	3

N/A= information not available

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! (20)

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 4 iced doughnuts in one sitting! (21)

Table 2 showing the 3 highest and 3 lowest in sugar beverages per pack

Product Name	Pack size (ml)	ABV (%)	Calories per pack (kcal)	Sugars per pack (g)	Teaspoons of sugar per pack
WKD Blue**	700	4.0	N/A	59	15
VK Blue**	700	4.0	N/A	52.4	13
Hooch Alcoholic Lemon Brew**	500	4.0	N/A	28.9	7
Kopparberg Light With Passionfruit*	250	4.0	83	6.2	2
Balans Mandarin Aqua Spritz*	250	4.0	60	1.5	0
Balans Lime Aqua Spritz*	250	4.0	58	0.5	0

N/A= information not available

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)

Table 3 showing the 3 highest and 3 lowest in sugar beverages per pack

Product Name	Pack size (ml)	ABV (%)	Calories per pack (kcal)	Sugars per pack (g)	Teaspoons of sugar per pack
Archers Schnapps & Lemonade***	250	5.4	215	33	8
Malibu Cola**	250	5.0	N/A	32.3	8
Goslings Dark 'N Stormy Black Seal Rum and Ginger Beer*	250	4.5	198	31.3	8
ASDA Vodka, Lime & Lemonade**	250	4.0	N/A	12	3
Tesco Triple Distilled Vodka With Lime and Lemonade**	250	5.0	73	0	0
Jack Daniels & no sugar Cola **	330	5.0	N/A	0	0

N/A= information not available

The worst offenders in this category have in excess of 30g sugar (8 teaspoons) in a serving – more sugar than nine custard cream biscuits! (22)

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

Table 4 showing the 3 highest and 3 lowest in sugar beverages per pack

Product Name	Pack size	ABV (%)	Calories per pack (kcal)	Sugars per pack (g)	Teaspoons of sugar per pack
Classic Combinations Pink Gin and Tonic*	250	4.0	178	27	7
Classic Combinations Rhubarb Gin and Ginger Ale*	250	4.0	155	20.8	5
Tanqueray Sevilla Gin and Tonic*	275	6.5	190	18	5
Sipsmith London Dry Gin and Light Tonic*	250	7.3	118	3.3	1
Classic Combination Gin and Diet Tonic*	250	4.0	73	0	0
Alfie Gin & Diet Tonic*	250	4.0	60	0	0

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 (23). 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/or low sugar mixers were all 0g sugar per serve, except for **Sipsmith London Dry Gin and Light Tonic** (3.3g sugar per serve).



Survey Conclusions

Our survey has highlighted for the first time the huge levels of sugar present in ready to drink alcoholic beverages. It is crucial that the public have access to clear nutrition information to help them make an informed choice. Food and soft drinks sold in supermarkets are generally expected to display colour-coded front of pack nutrition labels which tell consumers at a glance if a product is high (red), medium (amber) or low (green) in sugar, salt, fat and saturated fat, and their contribution to daily intakes.

Sugar and calories in alcoholic drinks are no different to sugar and calories in foods and soft drinks. It makes absolutely no sense that alcoholic drinks are exempt, they must be held to account.

Given the significance of the findings we received the following comments in response to the results of our survey:

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of the Alcohol Health Alliance said: “Consumers have the right to know exactly what they are drinking. This latest research demonstrates - once again - that the current system of the self-regulation of alcohol labelling isn’t working and the industry is not taking its responsibilities seriously. Shoppers who buy alcohol get less information about what’s in their drink than those who buy milk or orange juice; this is simply outrageous.

“We urge the Government to introduce mandatory labelling on alcohol products in order to give all of us easy access to the information needed to make healthier choices.”

Lorraine Tulloch, Programme Lead, Obesity Action Scotland said: “Ready to drink alcoholic beverages may be convenient but this study shows the alarming amount of sugar the industry is adding to these products. These products aren’t required to have a nutrition label on them and we can see very few companies have chosen to provide this information. It is vital that customers be afforded an informed choice when purchasing food or drinks – there is no good reason why this should be any different simply because these drinks contain alcohol. The lack of available on-pack nutrition information, exposed by the survey, shows that voluntary self-regulation by the alcohol industry is not good enough.”

Alison Douglas, Chief Executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland said, “This research provides another example of the alcohol industry choosing to withhold basic information from consumers. At the moment it’s impossible to make an informed choice. Unlike for other food and drink, there is no legal requirement to provide details on sugar content or ingredients on alcoholic products. We need reliable information directly on bottles and cans where it can usefully inform our decisions.

“Alcohol Focus Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government’s statement that they will consider mandatory action if industry don’t act. Sadly alcohol producers have proven time and time again they won’t do this voluntarily. It’s time they were required by law to do so. The public want and need this information and have a right to be provided with it.”

Dr Saul Konviser from the Dental Wellness Trust charity says:

“It’s truly shocking that these popular ‘ready to drink’ pre-mixed spirits are packed with excessive sugar and hidden calories and it’s no wonder the UK has a tooth decay crisis on its hands. Good oral health is a basic human right yet for some reason, drink manufacturers are being allowed to peddle these unhealthy drinks with limited nutritional information on pack. It’s ludicrous that drinks such as lemonade are subject to the sugar tax yet a vodka and lemonade is exempt. Now is the time for tough government led action to protect this human right.”

Action on Sugar Recommendations

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. Action on Sugar urges government to prove it is committed to preventing ill health and reducing health inequalities by:

- Enforcing the agreed sugar reduction criterion on alcoholic beverages, as set by government in the soft drink industry levy (SDIL)
- Using the opportunity Brexit presents to ensure that all food, drink and alcoholic products display colour-coded front of pack nutrition labels
- Restricting advertising, promotions and marketing of all alcoholic drinks.
- Look to learnings from the devolved nations on how to reduce alcoholic drinks consumption
- Conduct feasibility studies to look at further policy measures such as plain packaging/warning labels

The alcohol industry currently polices itself via the industry funded Portman Group, to demonstrate it is committed to improving public health, we urge **manufacturers** to:

- Ensure that the alcohol industry participates in the sugar (and calorie) reformulation programme with strict monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
- Display colour-coded front of pack nutrition labels on all packaging
- Use low-calorie mixers and syrups as standard and to reduce the sweetness of their alcoholic drinks
- Market, promote and advertise their products responsibly

To reduce harms from alcohol, **individuals** should moderate their drinking to below the upper limit of 14 units per week as recommended by the NHS (26). Action on Sugar suggests individuals:

- Look for labelling and compare products to choose better alternatives, where that is not possible, choose low calorie and low alcohol alternatives
- Write to your MP and to drinks manufactures, including retailers, to highlight the issue
- Write to drinks manufactures, including retailers, to complain about high sugar levels and lack of labelling

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20. One can of Red Bull contains 27.5g of sugar: <https://groceries.morrisons.com/webshop/product/Red-BullEnergy-Drink/212476011?from=search¶m=redbull>
21. Sainsbury's Raspberry Ripple ring doughnut contains 13.3g sugar per doughnut: <https://www.sainsburys.co.uk/shop/gb/groceries/sainsburys-raspberry-ripple-stripe-doughnut-x4>
22. A custard cream biscuit has 3.3g of sugar per biscuit: <https://www.sainsburys.co.uk/shop/gb/groceries/biscuit-barrel/sainsburys-custard-creams-200g>
23. A 330ml can of Coca Cola contains 35g/330ml and 10.6g/100ml of sugar. <https://www.cocacola.co.uk/drinks/coca-cola/coca-cola>

Colour coding in tables is based on front of pack colour-coded nutrition labelling criteria (Sugars - Red >13.5g/portion or >11.25g/100ml, Amber >2.5≤11.25/100ml, Green ≤2.25g/100ml)

* Data obtained from 'on pack' information

** Data obtained by independent analysis

*** Data obtained from manufacturer's websites

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About us

Action on Sugar was launched in 2014 to inform and influence sugar reduction policies in the UK, which can also be replicated worldwide, to support the population in consuming no more than the recommended five percent of total energy from free sugars.

Action on Sugar comprises leading expert advisors who have been striving to commit the government to releasing an evidenced-based childhood obesity strategy and to ensure that it is then implemented effectively.

Action on Sugar has successfully created a huge amount of awareness of the impact of excess sugar and calorie consumption on our wellbeing. Already, manufacturers and retailers have reformulated their products following our widely publicised surveys exposing the high and low sugar products through national, and international, media. Action on Sugar works closely with the food and drink industry to inform their nutrition strategies and provide technical expertise around sugar reduction. We publish research in influential journals demonstrating our findings and modelling the impact of sugar reduction strategies, which is used to influence the decision of policy makers with persuasive evidenced-based arguments.

Action on Sugar is a registered charity and is funded by charitable donations. We do not accept any funding from the food or drinks industry.

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FoodSwitch UK is a free app brought to you by Action on Sugar, in collaboration with The George Institute for Global Health, to help you find out what's in the food you're eating, so you can make simple switches to healthier options. Simply scan the barcode of your regular brand to get colour coded nutrition information and see a list of healthier alternatives. Download the app [here](#).

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