



## Would booze nutrition labels make you drink smarter?

By Diane C. Lade, Staff writer

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Take a quick peek at the nutrition fact labels on that fruitcake tin or cookie package and you'll know how many calories to burn off if you decide to indulge. But when it comes to tipping back your favorite New Year's cocktail, you're on your own.

Labeling requirements for alcohol vary widely from product to product — and, in some cases, don't even include a list of basics like ingredients, calories and carbohydrates. A national consumer's group pushing for standardized alcohol labeling warns holiday partygoers that a trip to the bar may equal the caloric equivalent of a cheeseburger.

"It's easy to drink several beers and not know how many calories you are ingesting," said Chris Waldrop, director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America.

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The federation and other consumer organizations say that along with nutrition information, all alcoholic beverage packaging should list the size of what's considered a standard single drink: 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of spirits. And just as there are warnings on tobacco products, Waldrop said, the alcohol label should include safe consumption levels: one drink a day for women, two a day for men.

Registered dietitian and licensed nutritionist Leslie Burman, who works with two South Florida hospitals and in private practice, said labeling would wake up some dieters. She recently counseled one woman who complained she couldn't lose weight but insisted the calories she drank didn't count.

The reality: A [Long Island](#) Iced Tea is 400 calories, Burman said, so drinking three a week would give you enough calories to gain a pound in a month. Imbibers also aren't aware that the average super-sized glass of wine at a restaurant is far more than the standard 5-ounce serving.

"I am all for having a drink and a good time," Burman said. "But people deserve to know what they are putting in their bodies."

Consumer groups initiated the call for standardized labels for beer, wine and spirits. The federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, the primary regulatory agency for alcohol, agreed to start drafting guidelines in 2007. But the agency has yet to act, Waldrop said, which is why the federation wanted to make the public aware of the issue this holiday season.

The bureau could not be reached for comment despite several phone calls and emails.

The [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) requires that some nutritional and manufacturing facts be on non-malt beers and wines containing less than 7 percent alcohol, but mandates nothing for distilled spirits. Starting next year, the FDA also will enforce a new law requiring chain restaurants to list each dish's calorie count on menus.

So would getting the straight scoop on booze actually change behavior? Todd Herbst, co-owner of the Big Time Restaurant Group in South Florida, said his Rocco's Tacos restaurants tried offering a Skinny Margarita that skipped the sugar-soaked sour mix, cutting calories by a third.

"It was delicious, but it didn't break any sales records," he said. "Everyone knows there are a ton of calories in a piña colada. But if you are sitting by a pool in Tahiti, you are going to drink it anyway."

Still Herbst, who works out and watches his Margarita consumption, said he'd be happy to post calorie counts if it helps customers make healthier choices.

"I know I want to know how many I'm consuming," he said.