

BRIEF

Alcohol needs to carry a cancer warning, public health groups urge government



TheNerdPatrol

Author [Jessi Devenyns](#)

Published Oct. 22, 2020

Dive Brief:

- A consortium of public health groups submitted a petition to the U.S. Treasury Department's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) requesting that warning statements on alcoholic beverages be amended to include a statement that identifies the link between alcohol consumption and cancer.
- According to surveys from both the [National Cancer Institute](#) and [American Institute for Cancer Research](#), fewer than half of U.S. adults know alcohol increases cancer risk. However, the link between alcohol consumption and cancer was first identified in 1987, and [researchers estimate cancers associated with alcohol consumption](#) affect nearly 90,000 Americans each year.

- More studies are finding evidence linking dietary patterns to the risk of chronic diseases, and alcohol is one example researchers are finding harms long-term health. With more people focused on improving their health through what they consume, having a label indicating alcohol is linked to cancer may lead to a sobering reality for many.

Dive Insight:

The campaign to put a cancer label warning on alcohol is not new, but industry lobbying has prevented this repeated scientific finding from becoming a statement of caution on bottles and cans in the U.S. This is despite a law requiring the TTB to consult with the surgeon general and “promptly report” to Congress if “available scientific information” justifies a change in the statement.

Making the change, however, requires the TTB to undertake a congressional reporting process before approving an amendment of the alcohol warning label. Currently, it cautions against motor vehicle operation after imbibing and drinking while pregnant. This petition urges the government to fulfill its legal obligation and provide full transparency on the ill health effects associated with alcohol.

The push to highlight the link between cancer and alcohol consumption is not new. In the surgeon general’s report from 2016, research found “even one drink per day may increase the risk of breast cancer.” The study also documented a link between alcohol consumption and cancers of the breast, oral cavity, esophagus, larynx, pharynx, liver and colorectum. [The American Institute for Cancer Research](#) also has stated “drinking alcohol increases the risk of many forms of cancer.”

Last year, the [Consumer Federation of America asked](#) the TTB to add statements that link alcohol consumption to cancer on beverage labels. Now with this petition, the request is supported by several groups, including Alcohol Justice, the American Institute for Cancer Research, the American Society of Clinical Oncology, the American Public Health Association, Breast Cancer Prevention Partners, Center for Science in the Public Interest and the U.S. Alcohol Policy Alliance.

Alongside this petition is a [recent report by the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee](#) that not only found little health value in alcohol consumption but went further by saying better long-term health results come from drinking less. It recommended adults consume only one alcoholic beverage per day.

With such strong support behind the idea that reducing alcohol consumption is good for one’s health, the historic omission of the link between cancer and alcohol consumption could soon be changed.

Even if the government holds off on revising the national warning labels, consumers already are limiting their own alcohol intake in an effort to watch their health and reduce calorie consumption. Beer volumes [have declined](#) steadily over the last several years while U.S. bottled low- and no-alcohol beverages are projected to jump about 32% between 2018 and 2022 — three times their growth in the previous five years — according to IWSR data [cited by Bon Appetit](#).

Large beer companies have taken notice. Anheuser-Busch, for example, [in July released its first zero-proof beer](#) under the Budweiser brand called Budweiser Zero, and [Boston Beer plans to launch a craft nonalcoholic brew](#) in early 2021 with Samuel Adams Just the Haze. AB InBev, Anheuser-Busch's parent company, plans to have [20% of its global beer volumes](#) coming from no- and low-alcohol beers by 2025. Two years ago, it named a [chief nonalcoholic beverages executive](#).

Market trends are skewing in favor of lower alcohol consumption by consumers. Should the government update its warning label on libations, it may further fuel this trend and push more drinkers to cut back or to consumer more lower or no-alcohol offerings.