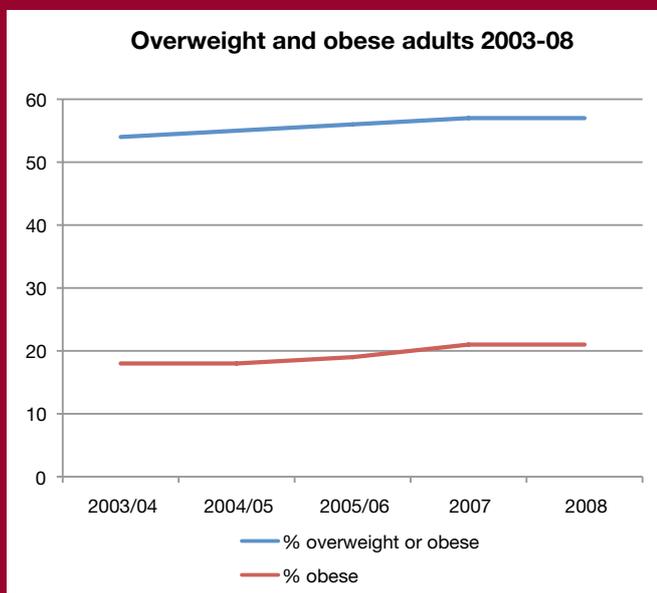


Alcohol and calories

Introduction

Weight gain is a major concern for many individuals, and not just for cosmetic reasons. 57% of adults in Wales are now overweight or obese¹ and weight gain has been linked to a range of health problems.

The reasons so many people are putting on weight are varied, but are linked to changing patterns of diet and physical activity. In simple terms, many of us are taking in more calories in the form of food and drink than our bodies are using. A major part of this is increasing levels of alcohol consumption.



Source: Welsh Health Survey 2003/04-2008.

There is a lack of public awareness about the calorific content of alcoholic drinks, and about how alcohol intake needs to be managed in order to maintain a healthy weight. This briefing paper sets out some basic information about calories and alcohol, and makes recommendations for ensuring consumers are able to make healthy choices when including alcohol in their diet.



Alcohol and weight gain

The amount of alcohol drunk in the UK has risen markedly since the 1960s.² 45% of adults in Wales say they drink more than the daily guideline amounts, including 28% reporting binge drinking (drinking more than twice the recommended daily amount).³ The true figure is likely to be considerably higher than this, as research has shown that surveys consistently underestimate how much people drink.⁴

Amongst adults who drink, alcohol accounts for nearly 10% of their calorie intake,⁵ yet many people have little idea how many calories they are consuming in the form of alcoholic drinks. A recent Alcohol Concern survey of 1,000 drinkers in Wales,⁶ found that 82% of people were unable to correctly identify the number of calories in a standard pint

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of beer or lager or a standard glass of wine. In addition, of those who said they usually kept track of the number of calories they consumed, 43% did not include calories from alcohol as part of this.

How many calories are there in alcoholic drinks?

The recommended daily calorie intake for a man is around 2,500 calories (kcal) and for a woman around 2,000. People who are aiming to lose weight often aim for around 500 calories per day less than this.⁷

One gram of alcohol provides seven calories (7kcal), compared with 9kcal per gram for fat, and 4kcal per gram for carbohydrate and protein. One unit of alcohol contains eight grams or 10ml of alcohol which provides 56kcal. However other ingredients in alcoholic drinks, such as sugar, cream and fruit juice, can add more calories.

Many people forget to include alcoholic drinks when watching what they eat. It's easy for calories from alcohol to add up quickly and unnoticed as they are being consumed as a liquid.⁸ Alcohol is also an appetite stimulant and can lead to overeating at mealtimes and late at night. To achieve and maintain a healthy weight it's best to moderate alcohol intake.

To provide all the nutrients needed to maintain health and reduce the risk of disease, a healthy balanced diet containing a variety of foods is needed. Alcoholic drinks lack most essential nutrients and vitamins, so if alcohol is providing many or most of the calories in the diet then there is a risk of nutritional deficiencies. Saving calories from food for alcohol, i.e. drinking alcohol rather than eating to prevent putting on weight – sometimes termed 'drunkorexia'⁹ – should be avoided.

Calorie content of popular drinks

Type of drink	Size	% Alcohol by volume (ABV)	Units	Calories (kcal)
Small glass wine	125ml	12	1.5	93
Standard glass of wine	175ml	12	2.1	130
Large glass of wine	250ml	12	3	185
Beer or lager	pint	3.8	2.2	182
Lager, large can	550ml	5	3	250
Strong beer or lager	pint	5	2.8	244
Cider	pint	4.5	2.6	244
Strong cider	pint	7.5	3.8	210
Continental lager, bottle	330ml	5	1.7	142
Whisky, single standard	25ml	40	1.0	56
Alcopop, bottle	275ml	4	1.1	198
Cream liqueur	50ml	17		175
Margarita cocktail		40+	2.3	145

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Policy recommendations

Given the low level of public understanding about alcohol and calories, clearer information needs to be provided to allow more people to make informed choices. Alcohol Concern's survey of drinkers in Wales found that 48% either agreed or strongly agreed that calorie information on alcohol packaging would help them regulate their drinking.¹⁰ At a time when governments are seeking ways to help consumers make healthier choices, improved labelling on alcohol would seem like an obvious place to start.

- Consideration needs to be given to effective ways of making calorific information about alcoholic drinks available to consumers at the point of sale: on menus in pubs and restaurants, and on alcohol packaging in shops. The previous UK government and the Welsh Assembly Government have supported moves within the European Union for consumers to have the same energy information on alcohol labels as on labels on other foods and drinks.¹¹ This issue needs to be pursued at a European level, and the current five year nutritional labelling exemption for wines, spirits, and beers removed.
- Within on-trade venues (pubs, clubs and restaurants) there needs to be a range of reasonably priced alternatives to alcoholic drinks available, including low-calories options. The requirement in the Home Office Mandatory Code for Alcohol Retailers in England and Wales that small (125ml) measures of wine, and single measure of spirits, be made available in all licensed premises from October 2010,¹² needs to be fully implemented and widely publicised, in order to give consumers more choice in managing their drinking.
- Further campaigns to raise awareness of the role of alcohol within a healthy diet need to be developed, considering alcohol intake within the context of the range of choices made in order to achieve a healthy lifestyle.

Useful resources

Drink Wise Wales

– your healthy guide to enjoying a drink
www.drinkwisewales.org.uk

Alcohol Concern

www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

British Dietetic Association

www.bda.uk.com

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