

The growing popularity of “low-carb” beers: good marketing or community health risk?

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TO THE EDITOR: The recent rapid increase in popularity of low-carbohydrate (“low-carb”) beers in Australia, such as Foster’s Pure Blonde and Lion Nathan’s Hahn Super Dry, may represent an insidious health risk. The perception that low-carb beers represent a healthy alternative may result in some consumers:

- confusing low-carb beers with low-alcohol beers;
- believing that there will be a significant health benefit associated with consumption of low-carb beers (such as weight loss);
- drinking more beer in the belief that there are fewer health consequences associated with low-carb beers; or
- drinking low-carb beer in situations where the consumption of regular beer may be contraindicated because of health conditions such as diabetes or cardiac vulnerability.

Particularly vulnerable risk groups include younger people and especially young women, who are often highly body image-conscious, as well as others with weight or health problems.

Nutritional information for some of the major beers on the market in Australia is shown in the Box.¹⁻³ The new generation of low-carb beers contain about 0.9 g of carbohydrate per 100 mL. However, there is little, if any, difference in either the amount of alcohol or the total energy content of traditional and low-carb beers, suggesting “low-carb” may not be a nutritionally significant improvement.

Given that alcohol is a known cause of short- and long-term problems such as cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, strokes and violent behaviour, we contend that the alcohol content of beer is a far more important health issue than its energy content. Additionally, the alcohol content itself contributes directly to energy intake (1 g of alcohol contributes 29.8 kJ of energy, compared with sugar’s 15.4 kJ).⁴ Consuming alcohol may also indirectly lead to weight gain because of its association with unhealthy eating behaviour, such as increased snacking, junk food consumption and overeating.⁵

The Box clearly demonstrates that drinkers are better off consuming low-strength

Nutritional information for major beers on the market in Australia¹⁻³

Beer	Alcohol by volume	Carb (g/100 mL)	Energy (kJ/100 mL)
Full strength			
Redback	4.7%	3.6	172
Hahn Premium	5.0%	3.2	172
Cascade Pale Ale	5.0%	3.0	170
Crown Lager	4.9%	3.1	169
Cascade Premium Lager	5.0%	3.0	169
Foster’s Lager	4.9%	3.1	168
Victoria Bitter	4.6%	3.0	165
Carlton Black	4.4%	3.3	161
Tooheys New	4.6%	3.1	161
Tooheys Extra Dry	5.0%	2.5	161
Melbourne Bitter	4.6%	2.9	158
Tooheys Old	4.4%	3.0	156
Carlton Draught	4.6%	2.7	155
Swan Draught	4.5%	2.7	153
XXXX Draught	4.5%	2.1	147
Mid-low strength			
XXXX Gold	3.5%	1.9	121
Hahn Premium Light	2.6%	3.1	119
Carlton Sterling	2.5%	3.1	114
Cascade Light	2.6%	3.0	114
Hahn Super Dry 3.5	3.5%	<1.0	104
Low-carb			
Carlton Dry	4.5%	1.9	139
Bondi Blonde	4.5%	<2.0	130
Tooheys Maxim	4.6%	1.6	126
Hahn Super Dry	4.6%	0.9	126
Pure Blonde	4.6%	0.9	125

Carb = carbohydrate. ◆

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1 Lion Nathan. Australian beers. <http://www.lionnathan.com/Great-Brands/AUS-Beer.aspx> (accessed Dec 2009).

2 Foster’s Group. Beer. <http://www.fosters.com.au/enjoy/beer.htm> (accessed Dec 2009).

3 Bondi Blonde. Dietary information. <http://www.bondiblond.com/TheBondiBlondeStory/Dietary-Information/tabid/83/Default.aspx> (accessed Dec 2009).

4 Garrow JS, James WPT, editors. Human nutrition and dietetics. 9th ed. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1993.

5 Schröder H, Morales-Molina JA, Bermejo S, et al. Relationship of abdominal obesity with alcohol consumption at population scale. *Eur J Nutr* 2007; 46: 369-376.

6 Corrigendum to Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods. *Official Journal of the European Union* 2007; 50 (L 12): 3-18. □

beers in terms of both alcohol content and energy intake. Recognising this fact, the European Parliament adopted the resolution that “Beverages containing more than 1.2% by volume of alcohol shall not bear health claims”.⁶ We believe that the Australian Government, particularly through its current Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy, should move quickly to enact similar legislation to protect the Australian public from the marketing claims of brewing companies. The message should be made explicit: low-carb beers are not a “healthy choice”.

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