

Fermented drinks and alcohol



Fermented drinks include kombucha, ginger beer, kvass and kefir. These drinks may contain varying levels of alcohol as a by-product of the fermentation process. Manufacturers are required to provide information on the label about alcohol content. Consumers, especially those vulnerable to the effects of alcohol such as pregnant women, drivers, and people operating machinery, should read these labels before consumption.

What are fermented drinks?

Kombucha, ginger beer, kvass and kefir are fermented drinks. Kombucha is produced from a mixture of steeped tea and sugar, combined with a culture of yeast strains and bacteria. Some kombucha products also have fruit juice or other flavours added during production. Kefir can be produced from milk (or a dairy alternative such as soy milk), water or coconut water.

Fermented drinks can contain low levels of alcohol as a by-product of fermentation

Kombucha, ginger beer, kvass and kefir drinks can contain residual alcohol from the fermentation process used in their manufacture. Drinks that have more than 0.5% alcohol by volume (ABV) are required by the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code to have a statement of alcohol content on the label. In NSW, products with an alcohol content greater than 1.15% ABV are considered to be an alcoholic drink.

A nationally coordinated survey by Food Regulators found that many fermented drink products such as kombucha, ginger beer, kvass and kefir contained alcohol. Some products tested had an alcohol content greater than 1.15% ABV or an alcohol content greater than that shown on their label.

For the kombucha samples tested, around 65% had more than 0.5% alcohol, and for water-based kefir samples tested 74% had more than 0.5% alcohol. The dairy-based kefir samples tested all had less than 0.5% alcohol. For samples of ginger

beer and kvass tested, around 31% had more than 0.5% alcohol.

In NSW, following the survey the NSW Food Authority worked with the industry to reduce the amount of alcohol in the drinks identified.

What are the health impacts of drinking fermented drinks that contain alcohol?

The health impact of drinking any amount of alcohol depends on the amount consumed and other factors. These include personal factors, such as the person's age, sex, weight, health status, and tolerance to drinking. There are also factors related to the drink and how it is consumed, such as the alcohol content (ABV), amount of drink consumed, duration over which the drink is consumed, and whether food was also consumed.

A person would need to drink more than four 350mL bottles of a drink which had 1.15% ABV, in order to consume one standard drink. Following consumption of a standard drink it would take between about one to three hours to reach a zero blood alcohol level.

The effects of drinking alcohol increase with the amount consumed and include reduced mental performance, coordination, balance, and fine motor skills. With increasing consumption of alcohol, individuals can experience drowsiness, deterioration in performance and behaviour, as well as place themselves at risk for longer term health problems. There is also a great deal of variation between individuals and this can affect how long alcohol remains in their body.

Who is most affected by drinking alcohol?

Some groups of people are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. This includes children, and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. People who have certain medical conditions, take prescription medications, or intend to drive a vehicle should be aware that drinking fermented drinks may increase their blood alcohol concentration.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) advises that healthy men and women should drink no more than two standard drinks on any day. Not drinking alcohol is the safest option for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and for those under 18 years of age.

What are the NSW Food Authority and NSW Health doing about this?

In NSW if a manufacturer has alcohol content or labelling issues with their fermented drink, the NSW Food Authority works with the business to bring alcohol levels down to the legal limit and to improve their labelling to ensure compliance with the law. If necessary, enforcement action is taken.

NSW Health is communicating with consumers and stakeholders to raise awareness of this issue.

Where do I go for more information?

The NSW Food Authority can be contacted if you have any questions about food regulations by phone (**1300 552 406** - local call Australia-wide) or email food.contact@dpi.nsw.gov.au.

MotherSafe provides a comprehensive counselling service for women and their healthcare providers during pregnancy and breastfeeding (**02 9382 6539**)

www.seslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/royal-hospital-for-women/services-clinics/directory/mothersafe

Healthdirect Australia can be contacted for 24 hour health advice on **1800 022 222** or at www.healthdirect.gov.au

If you have any questions about a specific fermented drink product, check the label or contact the manufacturer directly for more information.



Where do I go for more information?

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