

Building Capacity for Action: European Alcohol Policy Conference  
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## How the alcohol health warning was not adopted in Finland

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Parallel session: Labelling

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# Background

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- **2004 March:** 33% cut in alcohol taxes
  - adaptation to EU enlargement
  - rapid increase in total alcohol consumption – 10% in one year
  - increase in adverse health and social consequences
- **2005 November:** inter-ministerial working group to develop measures to curb the trend
- **2006 March:** Government presents a package of alcohol policy measures

# Part of a package

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## New or tightened regulations

- retail sale not permitted before 9 a.m. (previously 7 a.m.)
- no more quantity discounts for multiple packages (6-pack, 12-pack, 24-pack)
- restrictions on price advertising – minimum campaign period 2 months
- time restriction on TV advertising – not before 9 p.m.
- age restriction for advertising in movie theatres – adult movies only
- **health warnings on alcohol containers**

# Change in legislation

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**April – October 2006:** amendment to the Alcohol Act prepared

- official consultations and hearings
- heavy lobbying by the alcohol industry, flanked by the media and advertising industries
- health warnings ridiculed in the media
- industry arguments echoed in Parliamentary discussions

**2007 February:** amendment to Alcohol Act (588/2007) passed

- a two-part health warning will be required on alcohol containers
- a general health warning about adverse health effects and a special warning about the risk of foetal damage caused by the product
- in Finnish and in Swedish
- exact text and technical details to be defined by ministerial decree

# Working group with industry representation

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- **2007 March:** Parliamentary elections – biggest winner National Coalition Party
- **2007 April:** Minister in charge of alcohol issues replaced
- **2007 June:** Minister sets a six-person working group to prepare the decree
  - brewers association; importers of wine; alcohol industry more broadly
  - medical research on alcohol; research on the effects of parents' drinking on children; research on alcohol education and information

# Size, placement, wording

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## Industry arguments:

- the size cannot be a percentage of the surface area because the surface area cannot be unequivocally defined
- fixed size would ruin the appearance of many containers
- smaller size in smaller bottles would give undue advantage in competition to spirits
- warning cannot be placed on the front because in some cases front and back cannot be distinguished

## Result:

- smallest readable size, placement free

# Wording of the warning

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## Risk of foetal damage

- pregnancy and planning of pregnancy - rejected
- refrain from drinking - rejected

## General health warning

- specific health conditions - rejected

## Result:

"WARNING: Alcohol is hazardous to the development of the foetus and to your health".

# Feedback from the Commission

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- **2007 September:** notification
- **2007 December & January 2008:** feedback from the Commission
- foetal effects
  - mutual recognition for products that are marketed in other Member States and that provide an equivalent level of information to the consumer
- general health warning
  - not acceptable because does not take into account differences in the level of alcohol consumption
  - Commission ready to examine a more precise warning
- **Reaction**
  - health warning abandoned