

Alcohol-Free Drinks Face Tougher Rules than Alcohol itself, Despite Greater Transparency and Lower Risk

*Alcohol Transparency Gap Exposed:
Functional Drinks Face Tougher Rules
Than Alcohol, Say Experts*

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Alcohol-Free and functional Alcohol-Free beverages, which are required to disclose full ingredient lists, safety substantiation, and tightly controlled claims, face higher regulatory transparency demands than alcoholic drinks — even though alcoholic beverages contain a range of biologically active compounds and toxic metabolites not disclosed to consumers, according to [SENTIA Spirits](#).

“Alcohol isn’t just ethanol, which is itself a toxin. Fermentation creates a cocktail of biologically active chemicals, yet consumers are told almost nothing about them.”

*Professor David Nutt, CSO,
SENTIA Spirits*

SENTIA Spirits produces alcohol-free spirits designed to replicate the relaxing and sociable effects of alcohol without intoxication. The company was founded by Professor David Nutt, former Chair of the UK Advisory

Council on the Misuse of Drugs and a leading figure in research on alcohol’s effects on the brain.

“Consumers often assume an alcoholic drink is just ethanol, water and flavour,” said Professor Nutt. “In truth, fermentation and ageing produce a complex mix of additional compounds, some of which contribute to hangovers and others that international agencies classify as potential carcinogens [1][2]. Yet alcohol labels typically provide no ingredient-level transparency at all.”

Transparency Demands: Alcohol vs Functional Drinks

Under current frameworks in major markets such as the United States, alcohol-free functional products are regulated on a substance-by-substance basis. These products must:

- List all ingredients
- Substantiate safety for functional claims

- Adhere to defined safety benchmarks
- Communicate ingredient information clearly to consumers

By contrast, alcoholic beverages are regulated as a category, with no general requirement to disclose:

- Full ingredient lists
- Nutritional information (such as calories, carbohydrates and sugars)
- Major food allergens
- Chemical constituents beyond alcohol content

While the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) in the US has proposed rules for standardized "Alcohol Facts" and allergen disclosure, these have yet to be finalized, and ingredient labeling has not been implemented. Health advocates have called on the administration to finalize these proposals to give consumers the information they need to make informed choices [3].

More Than Just Ethanol: What's in Alcoholic Drinks?

Scientific studies and advocacy analyses show that alcoholic beverages contain multiple substances beyond ethanol, including:

- Acetaldehyde, a metabolic product of ethanol that is classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) as a carcinogen [2].
- Methanol, present at trace levels, regulated due to its toxic profile and greater prevalence in fruit spirits [1].
- Fusel alcohols, such as propanol, isobutanol and isoamyl alcohols, which contribute to sensory effects and hangovers [5].
- Ethyl carbamate (urethane), formed during fermentation and ageing, classified by IARC as "probably carcinogenic" [1][4].
- Furfuryl alcohol and furfural, formed during barrel toasting and ageing, classified as possibly carcinogenic [1].
- Trace contaminants and additives, including biogenic amines and potential allergens, that are not consistently disclosed.

These compounds vary by beverage type and production process but are part of the inherent



chemistry of fermented and distilled drinks.

Consumer Demand and Advocacy

Consumer advocacy groups have long pushed for greater alcohol transparency. In the US, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) — a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit focused on consumer protection, nutrition and food safety — has called on regulators to finalize proposals to require nutrition facts, ingredient lists and allergen disclosures for alcoholic beverages [3][4].

In August 2025, CSPI and allied organizations submitted comments urging the TTB to finalize “Alcohol Facts” and allergen label proposals and to revive mandatory ingredient labeling, after a years-long campaign including litigation to compel regulatory action. These proposals would bring alcohol labeling closer to the standards already required for foods and non-alcoholic beverages [3].

Supporters of greater transparency argue that the current voluntary regime has achieved limited adoption, with few major brands including ingredient or nutrition information even when permitted to do so. Mandatory, standardized labeling would make information easier to find and compare, and align alcohol with consumer expectations for transparency in other categories [4].

A Consumer Information Issue, Not a Moral One

SENTIA emphasises that this is not an argument about demonising alcohol, but rather about whether consumers are given the information they expect and deserve when choosing products.

“This is about informed choice,” said a SENTIA CEO David Orren. “Consumers expect to know what’s in their food and non-alcoholic drinks, down to ingredients and allergens. Yet many alcoholic beverages disclose only the brand, alcohol percentage, and health warning, with no insight into nutritional content or the complex chemistry present.”

The organisation notes that other consumer categories — from food to tobacco — have moved toward greater transparency about constituents associated with health effects. Alcohol remains an exception [3][4].

Media Availability:

SENTIA Spirits is available to provide:

- Background briefings on alcoholic beverage constituents and metabolism
- Samples of SENTIA's alcohol-free functional spirits
- Interviews with Professor David Nutt on alcohol chemistry, regulation, and consumer

transparency

References:

- [1] International Agency for Research on Cancer, IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans: Alcohol Consumption and Ethyl Carbamate, Vol. 96 (Lyon: IARC, 2010).
- [2] International Agency for Research on Cancer, Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans: Acetaldehyde Associated with Alcohol Consumption, Vol. 100E (Lyon: IARC, 2012).
- [3] Centre for Science in the Public Interest, Health Advocates Call on Trump Administration to Finalize Proposals for Transparency in Alcohol Labeling, press release (CSPI, 15 August 2025) <https://www.cspinet.org/press-release/health-advocates-call-trump-administration-finalize-proposals-transparency-alcohol>
- [4] Centre for Science in the Public Interest, Why We Need More Transparent Alcohol Labeling (CSPI, updated 2025) <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/why-we-need-more-transparent-alcohol-labeling>

[5] Lachenmeier, D.W. and Kanteres, F., 'Relevance of Congeners for the Harmful Effects of Alcoholic Beverages', *Addiction*, 105.12 (2010), pp. 213–223.

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