

# **RARHA WP5 survey**

## **Part 2: Standard Drink**

Definitions, communication approaches  
and public understanding







RARHA WP5 survey: Part 2. Standard Drink definitions, communication approaches and public understanding

Authors: Sandra Coughlan / Joseph Doyle

Date: November 2014/May 2015

Email: [sandra.coughlan@hse.ie](mailto:sandra.coughlan@hse.ie)



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# Table of contents

Definitions of a standard drink .....	8
Who decided on the SD definition in your country? .....	9
What is the rationale for the SD definition in your country? .....	9
When was the first SD definition decided in your country? .....	10
Has the public understanding of the SD definition in your country been evaluated?.....	10
Would an agreed EU SD definition be helpful to the population in your country to measure their personal alcohol consumption? .....	11



# RARHA WP5 survey

## Part 2: Standard Drink definitions, communication approaches and public understanding

Joint Action on Reducing Alcohol Related Harm (RARHA) is an initiative under the EU health programme to take forward work in line with the EU Strategy on alcohol related harm by strengthening the common knowledge base. The work is carried out through cooperation by expert organisations in public health from 30 European countries.

There are different national definitions of a standard drink / unit of alcohol which may reflect differences in drinking cultures across Europe. These differences may lead to confusion when, for example, information on low-risk drinking levels originating from one country is spread across borders through the internet or on the labels of alcoholic beverages.

The purpose of Part 2 of the RARHA survey, carried out by the Health Service Executive, Ireland, was to gather further information on standard drink practices, such as the rationale for defining the standard drink measure and the use of standard drink measures in public education messages.

The survey was issued to all CNAPA members and to other stakeholders with a closing date of 20 July 2014 . The guidance given to the stakeholders in each country was to revert back through the relevant CNAPA member to ensure one agreed response to each part of the survey from each participating country.

In total, 27 responses to part 2 of the survey were received. Four countries were unable to participate at this time and not every country answered every question so the following report is a summary of the responses received.

## Definitions of a standard drink

As one component of Part 1 of the RARHA survey, the Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Italy undertook a survey in 2014 to determine the number of grams of alcohol in standard drinks across Europe. 29 out of the 31 European countries invited to participate did so (Bulgaria and Slovakia did not reply). The results of the survey indicated variation in the number of grams of alcohol in a standard drinks between countries (Table 1). The lowest number of grams of alcohol are in the UK unit at 8 grams and the highest in Austria at 20 grams. Eleven European countries have 10 grams of alcohol in a standard drink and five have 12 grams in a standard drink.

Table 1 Grams of alcohol in a standard drink by country

Country	Number of grams
Austria	20g
Croatia	10g, 14g
Czech Republic	16g
Denmark	12g
Estonia	10g
Finland	12g
France	10g
Germany	10g, 12g
Greece	10g, 16g
Hungary	10g, 14g
Iceland	8g, 12g
Ireland	10g
Italy	12g
Latvia	12g
Lithuania	10g
Luxembourg	12g
Malta	8g, 10g
Netherlands	10g
Norway	12g, 15g
Poland	10g
Portugal	10g
Romania	12g
Slovenia	10g
Spain	10g
Sweden	12g
Switzerland	10g, 12g
United Kingdom	8g



## Who decided on the SD definition in your country?

In part 2 of the RARHA survey, carried out by HSE, there were 27 responses to the question “Who decided on the SD definition in your country” and these were as follows: the majority of responses indicated the ministry of health either solely or in collaboration with others defined the standard drink for their country. Specifically, 9 countries responded that the definition was decided by the ministry of health with a further 6 countries saying it was decided by the ministry of health in collaboration (in 2 cases) with the health services providers and (in 4 cases) with health researchers. There were a further 4 responses that fitted under the ‘other category’, such as Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Social Affairs, State Agency, and finally one country stating that there was no agreed SD definition in their country. In addition, one country did not know who defined their standard drink.

## What is the rationale for the SD definition in your country?

When asked ‘whether the standard drink definition used in your country was the same as used in other countries’, 8 countries responded ‘yes’, one country responded ‘don’t know’ and one responded that it is based on WHO recommendations, while the remaining countries either did not answer the question or stated that the question was ‘not applicable’.

In response to the question ‘which country was the definition based on’, the following responses were received :

- 20 countries did not answer this question
- 1 country stated that it was based on a number of European countries and Australia
- 1 country referenced the UK’s definition but did not state that its definition was based on it
- 1 country referenced Australia but did not say that its definition was based on it
- 1 country referenced the WHO
- 1 country referenced the German BzGa Federal Centre
- 1 country reviewed international definitions and chose the most common

Some other more general points referred to in the responses include reference to following the scientific views in the literature, WHO definition and one country stated that while there was no official definition, from experts and literature there was an accepted view that 10-12g was the classical size of an alcoholic drink.

## When was the first SD definition decided in your country?

In terms of when the standard drink definition was decided there were a range of responses.

The earliest mentioned was 1956 with another country stating the 1970's, however the majority were in the noughties, followed by the nineties and eighties and the general breakdown was as follows:

1980's - 4 countries

1990's – 4 countries

2000's – 9 countries

2010's – 3 countries

Eight countries have revised their definition since it was first established while seven countries stated it had not been revised but for four of the seven countries the definition was decided within the last decade.

## Has the public understanding of the SD definition in your country been evaluated?

Only 5 countries indicated that the SD definition had been evaluated and 18 countries stated that it had not been evaluated while the remaining countries did not answer the question.

### **If understanding was evaluated, who commissioned the evaluation?**

Of the 5 countries that have evaluated their standard drink definition to date, 2 of the evaluations were commissioned by the ministries of health in these countries, 1 country by a health service provider, 1 as part of a small government funded community action research project and the remaining country by a national institute for research and as part of a regular national survey series

### **If understanding was evaluated, how would you rate understanding among the general public of the SD definition?**

#### **Among alcohol consumers**

Three of the five respondents stated that the national understanding of a standard drink among alcohol consumers was very good (with more than 60% of the respondents understanding the definition). 1 country stated that the national understanding was neither

good nor bad (40-49%) while another country rated its national understanding as very poor (less than 30%)

### **Among the general public**

Two of the five respondents stated that the national understanding of a standard drink among the general public was very good (with more than 60% of the respondents understanding the definition). 2 countries stated that the national understanding was neither good nor bad (40-49%) while one country rated national understanding as very poor (less than 30%)

## **Would an agreed EU SD definition be helpful to the population in your country to measure their personal alcohol consumption?**

### **(a) To support health and social care practitioners to assess patient / client alcohol consumption**

15 countries reported that an agreed EU SD definition would be helpful to health and social care practitioners as it would have more standing than a national or regional measure and would allow the exchange and standardisation of clinical guidelines and training between countries. It would also facilitate the comparison of situations between member states. Finally it would increase public understanding of alcohol content in drinks across Europe.

8 countries reported that an agreed EU SD definition would not be helpful to health and social care workers as there are existing national definitions and comprehensive information packages in place. Others said that alcohol measures varied across countries and it would be difficult to agree a European standardised measure.

One response was undecided but stated on it could be a good idea if comprehensive education and labelling measures were in place but the respondent felt that the resources may not be available to do this.

**15 countries who reported that an agreed EU SD definition would be helpful to health and social care workers provided the following reasons:**

- more uniformity
- all professionals trained and following the same guideline
- common criteria for assessment of clients
- helpful in the design of assessment tools
- helpful in adapting material from other countries
- facilitating use of international guidelines
- allows EU comparisons and useful for guidelines re risk but not to replace recognised tools such as audit
- enables assessment of drinking and recommendations re-change

- greater resonance than a national definition
- easier to compare between countries and allow for political debate
- standardised approach
- helpful for dealing with non-residents , tourists, people moving across borders

8 countries reported that **an agreed EU SD definition would not be helpful to health and social care workers provided the following reasons:**

- a SD definition alone is not helpful and needs to be linked to comprehensive consumer information
- a national definition is already in place and unlikely to be replaced
- if a EU definition differed from local measures / it could cause confusion
- for health professional, in face to face work - need to check anyway with the patient / client re their understanding of SD measure and intake guidelines
- definition is already based on beverages consumed within our country
- using the concept of a typically used glass is easier than re-calculating an EU SD definition
- as SD measurement is currently understood differently across Europe it could cause confusion however the amount of pure alcohol listed in grams on the labels of products could be linked to EU or national guidelines based on weekly total consumption of grams.

One response was undecided but stated on it could be a good idea if the correct education and labelling measures were in place but there was a feeling that the required efforts to accompany may not be put in place

#### **(b) To be better informed of the alcoholic content of drinks**

The majority of respondents believed the adoption of an EU agreed SD definition would help to standardise information on alcohol content in drinks and inform the public and professionals of this content. It would also facilitate more accurate comparisons between countries.

On the other hand 4 countries said 'no' as measures of alcohol differ across and within countries and were concerned about confusing health professionals and drinkers. In addition, one country suggested that the only uniform measure in Europe was the gram and suggest that calculations of safe drinking alcohol could be in grams rather than standard drinks.

Two countries were undecided.

The majority of respondents believed the adoption of an EU agreed SD definition would help to be better informed of the alcoholic content of drinks . The reasons outlined are described below:

- it makes consumers realize how much alcohol there is in high grade alcoholic products
- access to information available from awareness campaigns messages, organisations' websites and literature will convey common information since it will apply to all countries within the EU, and thus enhance the public's understanding
- it will increase Europeans' awareness of the amount of pure ethanol in alcoholic drinks
- an agreed definition is a pre-condition when proposing and implementing a requirement to publish alcohol content on the bottle/container of alcoholic drink
- apart from EU labelling regulations issues, people should be better informed to consider their drinking habits considering carefully the amount consumed , increasing the awareness of the exposure to alcohol related risk.
- primary prevention - use for public information, for informational materials, for innovative approaches etc..
- an agreed EU SD definition would help because it would probably have greater resonance than a nationally-established one. However it would ultimately depend on the degree of publicity given to the definition
- make it easier to label and give information and to assist countries to put labels on alcohol ie as on tobacco products.
- congruent, easy to use message
- although general knowledge on different content of alcohol in different kind of drinks is quite good, for so called "soft drinks" as beer and cocktails/mixed drinks the perception is rather distorted (these beverages are usually considered almost harmless),
- to measure personal alcohol consumption
- having a unique expression of the alcohol content will allow a better understanding of the general population on this content, no matter of product/company
- standard definition would make it more clear to the consumer
- possibly could help the public to be better informed. Research suggests unit content of drinks is not well understood so another method may be helpful
- it is an easy way to understand the content of alcohol for consumers
- facilitates communication, protection of health
- indicating the pure alcohol content in SD's on beverage packages (and providing similar information in on-premise establishments) would help understand the equivalence of alcoholic beverage types (beer/wine/spirits) in terms of strength. In the single market SD labelling would seem easier to implement EU-wide than nationally; that would require an EU SD.
- because this should make people aware that alcohol doses served at home are generally much bigger than in bars where the SD is used as a norm.
- it may create an added value for enlarging information base for the public understanding and acceptance of standardisation.

Four countries responded that they felt an agreed SD definition would not be helpful to be better informed of the content of alcoholic drinks based on the reason described below:

- there is no uniformity in standard drink measurement across EU countries and it would be confusing. However, if there was a requirement to outline the amount of pure alcohol (measured in grams) on the label of alcohol products then the key health messages could be linked to EU or national guidelines based on the weekly total consumption in grams.
- SD alone is not very helpful. It needs to be linked with comprehensive consumer information
- high variation of classic beverage serving sizes between countries and even regions within countries. SD should be adapted to a standard serving size in order for people to have a concrete understanding of what one SD is in their region or country.
- problematic drinkers are not interested in the labels and scientific facts
- in case Emergency Department SD definition differs from the national definition used it would cause uncertainty in screening methods.

Two countries were undecided in this respect as outlined below

- We are not sure in this respect. Fact is that at this time nothing exists like commonly accepted notion of EU SD.
- maybe it depends of social culture in the country

### **(c) To measure personal alcohol consumption**

The majority of respondents believed the adoption of an EU agreed SD definition would help to measure personal alcohol consumption. It was felt it would be easier for the consumer to calculate the amount of alcohol consumed wherever a person might be. It was felt this would contribute to lower risk consumption through increased awareness.

There were 5 responses from countries that felt that the adoption of an agreed SD definition would not be helpful. It was felt that as there is no uniformity of a SD measurement and a variety of classic beverage sizes across countries and even regions it would be confusing on its own without comprehensive consumer information. It was also felt that while there may be advantages the cultural acceptance of such a definition would take a longer time. One country stated that if there was a requirement to outline the amount of pure alcohol in grams on the label then key health messages could be linked to EU guidelines.

The majority of countries thought the agreed EU definition of a SD would be helpful to measure personal consumption with some of the responses below:

- it makes it easier for consumers to calculate the number of glasses he/she consumes

- It will be easier to self monitor in cases of travelling abroad, since the same guidelines will be applicable wherever a person might be
- The EU SD definition will enhance the possibility among EU people to adopt a safer way of alcohol drinking.
- Consensus on the SD would facilitate development of and adaption of tools for personal consumption measurement.  
A EU Standard Unit decreases the possibility of misunderstanding and improves the equity of messages that are aimed at increasing awareness in the same way all over Europe
- It would possibly make a difference, but once again, the determining factor would be the publicity campaigns encouraging people to monitor and measure their consumption
- it will allow a unique way of assessment of the personal consumption.
- Consumption could be measured more easily and compared between different countries
- As above, could possibly help the public to measure their personal alcohol consumption better. Research suggests consumers typically over pour and so another method of tracking consumption may be helpful
- It makes easier for consumers to measure their personal consumption.
- to be better informed about consequences of personal drinking
- SD labelling (and similar information in on-premise establishments) would help notice differences in strength within a beverage category (e.g. variation in alc % in wines) and would help keep a count of drinks when buying packages of different sizes. In the single market SD labelling would seem easier to implement EU-wide than nationally; that would require an EU SD.
- maybe for those who are interested in to measure how much you drink but that is not popular in our country
- it might help with measuring the consumed volume of alcohol.

Five countries responded an agreed SD definition would not be helpful to measure personal consumption for the reasons below:

- To measure the volume of alcohol consumption is more reliable if it is based on typical beverage specific quantities. People in continental Europe do not report their consumption in number of drinks, but they speak in terms of specific beverages. (For instance they say I had two glasses of beer and three shots of spirit, instead of I had five drinks.)  
We can imagine that the concept of EU SD may have advantages, but in this moment there is not a common sense in this respect. Cultural adoption and acceptance of such a concept will require longer time.
- SD alone is not very helpful. It needs to be linked with comprehensive consumer information

- Because there is not uniformity of a standard drink measurement across EU countries and it would therefore be confusing. However, if there was a requirement to outline the amount of pure alcohol (measured in grams) on the label of alcohol products then the key health messages could be linked to EU or national guidelines based on the weekly total consumption of grams.
- High variation of classic beverage serving sizes between countries and even regions. SD should be adapted to a standard serving size in order for people to have a concrete understanding of what one SD is. Nevertheless drinking guidelines in g/day or/and week would be very helpful.



