

From next year, all liquor bottles to carry warnings Udit Mukherjee

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Come April 2019, every liquor bottle in the country — spirits (whiskey, rum, gin, vodka, brandy) as well as beers and wines — will carry a health warning in bold letters that you now see on packaged tobacco products. And Bangla, the heady country spirit produced in Bengal and known for its high-alcohol content, may soon turn less intoxicating; it is set to lose much of its alcohol content, acquire a flavour and even get a colour (it is now colourless).

Both moves are part of a pan-India move to follow the World Health Organisation's "drink healthy and drink less" guidelines and a consequence of alcohol's inclusion in the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India regime from next April. FSSAI guidelines would become mandatory for alcoholic beverages from 2019, senior state government officials told TOI.

There will be two messages on all liquor bottles across the country — "Drinking is injurious to health" and "Don't drink and drive" — from next year though there will not be any pictorial warning of the type that is there on tobacco product packets. FSSAI had even thought of pictorial warnings on liquor bottles, International Spirits and Wine Association of India executive chairman Amrit Kiran Singh told TOI, but then dropped the idea following protests from various industry associations. "There are warnings on liquor bottles in some states now but there is no uniformity," he said.

IMFL INVASION

'Flavoured country spirit hasn't been well received'

Most southern states have already replaced country liquor with low-end India-Made Foreign Liquor in accordance with WHO directives. "We have heard that other states, too, will now consider that," said a senior executive of a spirits manufacturer.

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WHO guidelines mandate that spirits have a maximum alcoholic strength of 42.8%, but country spirits are often more potent, with alcohol content reaching 50%. FSSAI does not have any specific directive on country spirits' alcoholic strength. But a leading bottler in Bengal told TOI that it had allowed distillers of country spirits to produce low-end IMFL from April.

"There is no specific directive on country spirits' colour, but we have been advised to add flavours. We have heard that, gradually, the entire country spirit market will move to low-end IMFL," he added. A pilot project to add flavours to Bangla has been tried out, but the response has not been good, said distributors.

Country spirit shops form a 25% chunk of the state's 6,000 liquor shops, but country spirits constitute almost 50% of the market in Bengal (in terms of volume sold). A leading retailer of IMFL and country spirits explained that all the changes were part of a natural process. "Official licences used to be issued for selling ganja and opium till the 1980s, but they were then discontinued and converted to country spirit licences," he said