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Latvia’s Health Ministry proposes raising the alcohol age to 20

The broader plan would ban alcohol advertising and gas station sales, with most changes scheduled for 2028

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Latvia’s Health Ministry has proposed raising the minimum age to buy and consume alcohol to 20, banning alcohol advertising, and stopping alcohol sales at gas stations under a new package of restrictions now under review.

The ministry submitted the plan for interagency consultation on Thursday, November 19, and the consultation is due to run until December 2. The proposals would still need government approval.

According to the ministry's report, the main changes would take effect on January 1, 2028. They would raise the legal minimum age for purchasing and consuming all alcoholic beverages from 18 to 20 and would also bar 18- and 19-year-olds from possessing alcohol for personal use. The ministry also wants to prohibit other people from involving that age group in drinking, including by supplying them with alcohol. One exception would apply to practical training in vocational education programs when a supervisor is present.

The ministry said it favors a single minimum age of 20 for all alcoholic drinks rather than a higher threshold only for spirits. It argued that young people in that age group also commonly consume beer, wine and cider, and that health risks depend not only on the strength of a drink but on the total amount of ethanol consumed, drinking frequency and drinking patterns.

The report responds in part to a citizens' petition called Alcohol from the Age of 21, which urged a higher age limit. The ministry said no European Union member state has a uniform minimum alcohol purchasing age of 21 and concluded that a uniform age of 20 would be more appropriate for Latvia if combined with stronger age checks, pricing measures, prevention efforts and tighter limits on alcohol's physical availability and promotion.

The proposal goes beyond age limits. The ministry is calling for a full ban on alcohol advertising, including brand advertising across all channels, while keeping current restrictions on sales promotions. It said partial restrictions still leave room for alcohol brands to remain visible through sponsorships, digital marketing and other forms of communication.

The package would also ban sponsorship of entertainment and sports events when sponsorship information refers to alcoholic beverages, alcohol brands or alcohol consumption. The ministry said related amendments to Latvia's electronic media law would be needed.

Another measure would prohibit retail alcohol sales at premises located on gas station sites or in nearby premises that are functionally connected to those stations. The ministry also wants new rules to reduce the visibility of alcohol in stores through what it described as a proportionate and practical approach.

For producers and sellers, the proposals could tighten commercial conditions across the beer, wine and spirits market by cutting advertising options and some retail channels if they are adopted. The ministry's report also points to possible further action on pricing, especially for low-cost alcohol.

In addition, the ministry is proposing new labeling requirements for alcohol packaging from January 1, 2029. Those rules would require warnings about alcohol's harmful effects on health, the risk of cancer, and warnings against drinking during pregnancy or while driving. The report also calls for additional ingredient and nutrition information, though it says some exemptions should apply for wine products and small alcohol producers. Those labeling changes would still need to be coordinated with the European Commission.

The ministry's report also reviews earlier alcohol controls that took effect on August 1, 2025. Since that date, off-premises retail alcohol sales in Latvia have been allowed from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. from Monday through Saturday and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday. For online and other distance sales, alcohol cannot be delivered earlier than six hours after an order is placed, and delivery must take place within the permitted sales hours. Rules introduced at the same time also restricted advertising of prices and discounts, along with several sales promotion practices.

After examining those measures, the ministry said they should remain in place and continue to be evaluated. The report includes an analysis by the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe, which found that in the five months after August 1, 2025, mortality from causes directly attributable to alcohol use was 27% lower than would have been expected if the previous trend had continued.

At the same time, the report says the observation period remains too short to draw firm conclusions about the long-term effects of the restrictions on drinking, disease, injuries or deaths. It also says the available data do not allow officials to fully separate the

impact of the restrictions from other factors.

The ministry’s economic assessment found that between August 2025 and March 2026, the volume of alcoholic beverages and beer released for consumption in Latvia was 6.6% lower than in the same period a year earlier. But it said that decline had started before the latest restrictions took effect and that the market was also influenced by changes in excise taxes, inflation, consumer purchasing power and other economic conditions. As a result, the report says the drop in sales cannot be attributed only to the alcohol controls.

Excise revenue from alcoholic beverages and beer remained at roughly the same level as in the previous comparable period, the report found, because higher tax rates offset the impact of lower sales volumes.

The economic effect has not been even across the market. The ministry said the report identified a stronger impact on some specialized retailers, distance-selling businesses and small regional stores, while overall retail data did not show a uniform decline across the whole sector.

The report also said alcohol prices in Latvia have fallen since the restrictions took effect, while prices in Lithuania and Estonia have risen. On that basis, the ministry recommended considering additional pricing measures aimed at reducing the availability of especially cheap alcohol.

Regulators also reported problems with enforcement and interpretation of the existing rules. The ministry said monitoring had found violations including advertising alcohol discounts, using happy hour promotions and bundle offers, and online breaches of legal sales hours, as well as illegal distribution channels. It therefore proposed stronger oversight, especially to check compliance with the mandatory six-hour waiting period for distance sales.

The Health Ministry said it prepared the report using information from the Economy and Finance ministries and in cooperation with the WHO Regional Office for Europe and Latvia’s Center for Disease Prevention and Control. Once the consultation period ends on December 2, the proposals are due to go to the government for consideration.