

ALCOHOL HEALTH WARNINGS + PREGNANCY



HEALTH WARNING
Alcohol can cause lifelong
harm to your baby

POLLING REPORT – EXTENDED DEMOGRAPHIC RESULTS

KEY FINDINGS

The majority (70%) of Australians support an effective health warning on all alcohol products and would take action on the issue.

Almost a quarter (23%) of Australians are not aware that drinking alcohol when pregnant is harmful to an unborn baby.

- » **People aged 25–34 years old are the least aware, with 35% unable to correctly identify zero alcohol as the only safe amount.**

Awareness of the specific health conditions caused by alcohol use during pregnancy is low. Almost one third (30%) of Australians are unaware alcohol can cause Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and almost one half (46%) of Australians are unaware of the risk of stillbirth.

- » **People aged 25–34 years old are the least aware that FASD is associated with alcohol use during pregnancy (39% unaware), closely followed by 18–24 year-olds (35% unaware).**
- » **Men are less aware than women of health conditions associated with alcohol use during pregnancy, particularly for FASD, with 63% men aware and 77% women aware.**

Less than one third (31%) of Australians recall seeing the current voluntary alcohol industry label on alcohol products.

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol is a teratogen, an agent that can impact the development of an embryo or fetus.¹ Alcohol use during pregnancy can result in damage to the brain and other organs of the unborn baby, as well as low birth weight, failure to thrive, stillbirth and miscarriage.^{2 3 4 5}

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the term used to describe a range of lifelong physical and/or neurodevelopmental impairments caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, and need support

with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and social skills to reach their full potential. The average life expectancy of a person with diagnosed FASD is just 34 years.⁶

The National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) draft alcohol guidelines state that women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should not drink alcohol.⁷ Yet awareness of these guidelines in Australia remains low, resulting in continued alcohol use during pregnancy. As 2016 results from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey show, an estimated 49 per cent of pregnant women drank alcohol before knowing they were pregnant, and 25 per cent continued to drink after knowledge of their pregnancy.⁸ For women actively trying to conceive, 2020 Australian research showed 85 per cent recently consumed alcohol and 56 per cent had consumed more than 4 standard drinks on one occasion.⁹ Qualitative research with Australian women indicates there is often confusion about whether alcohol should be avoided during pregnancy, and drinking during pregnancy is sometimes encouraged through beliefs that it is safe to have an occasional drink.¹⁰

This polling report highlights the current low awareness of the health risks of alcohol during pregnancy. People in the most common age bracket for having children, 25-34 year-olds, had the lowest level of awareness of the danger of alcohol during pregnancy. Men were consistently less aware than women, which is concerning as Australian research indicates 75 per cent of pregnant women who drink usually drink with their partner, and that male partners initiate a drinking occasion nearly 40 per cent of the time.¹¹

ABOUT THE POLLING

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) commissioned YouGov Galaxy to poll Australians to understand their awareness of the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy.

The nationally-representative polling was conducted online between 20 January 2020 and 1 February 2020. The sample comprised 2,264 respondents aged 18 years and over, residing in Australia. To ensure results were representative, the sample was boosted in smaller states/territories to reach a minimum base size of 200 respondents. After data collection, results were weighted by age, gender and location according to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population estimates.

FINDINGS

AUSTRALIANS DEMAND ACTION ON HEALTH WARNINGS

FARE polled Australians as to their support and willingness to take action on health warnings about the risk of drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Respondents could view the proposed new warning from Food Standards Australia New Zealand* and were told the intention was for this to replace the current label and make it mandatory. The majority (70%) of Australians said they support this change and would be willing to take action on the issue.

As Table 1 shows, support for improving health warnings was similar across the board but was highest in New South Wales (73%), Australian Capital Territory (73%) and Northern Territory (71%).

TABLE 1. WILLINGNESS TO SUPPORT AND TAKE ACTION ON HEALTH WARNING LABELS, BY STATE/TERRITORY

	AUSTRALIA (%)	NSW (%)	ACT (%)	VIC (%)	TAS (%)	QLD (%)	SA (%)	WA (%)	NT (%)
Proportion who are willing to support and take action	70	73	73	68	70	69	67	69	71

*The label shown was as originally proposed by FSANZ in October 2019, which was under consideration when the poll was undertaken

TOO FEW AUSTRALIANS UNDERSTAND THAT NO AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL SHOULD BE USED WHILE PREGNANT

Almost one quarter (23%) of Australians aren't aware that drinking alcohol when pregnant is harmful to an unborn baby. Respondents were either unable to correctly identify zero standard drinks as the only safe amount a pregnant woman can consume or answered 'don't know' (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. PROPORTION ANSWERING WHAT THEY THINK IS THE SAFEST NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS A PREGNANT WOMAN CAN CONSUME ON ANY ONE OCCASION TO AVOID HARM TO THE FETUS

RESPONDENT ANSWERS	PROPORTION (%)
Zero	77
One	7
Two	6
Three	2
Four	1
Five or more	0
Don't know	6
Subtotal for incorrect answers - one or more standard drinks and don't know	23

When analysing responses by gender and age, there are significant differences. Those aged 25-34 years were the least aware (35% unaware), followed by those aged 35-49 years (28% unaware) (see Figure 1). This is also the group most likely to be having children, with 31.4 being the median age for mothers in Australia in 2018 and 33.5 for fathers.¹² Men are more likely (29%) to be unaware than women (17%) that no alcohol should be drunk while pregnant (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. PROPORTION ANSWERING INCORRECTLY TO WHAT IS THE SAFEST NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS A PREGNANT WOMAN CAN CONSUME ON ANY ONE OCCASION TO AVOID HARM TO THE FETUS, BY AGE GROUP

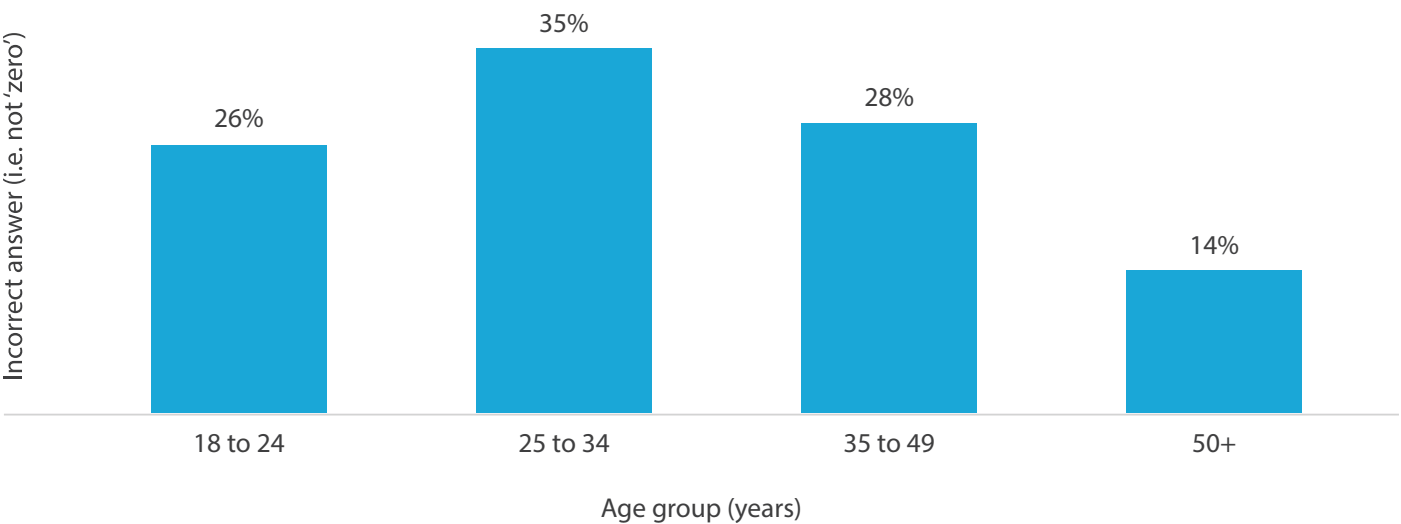
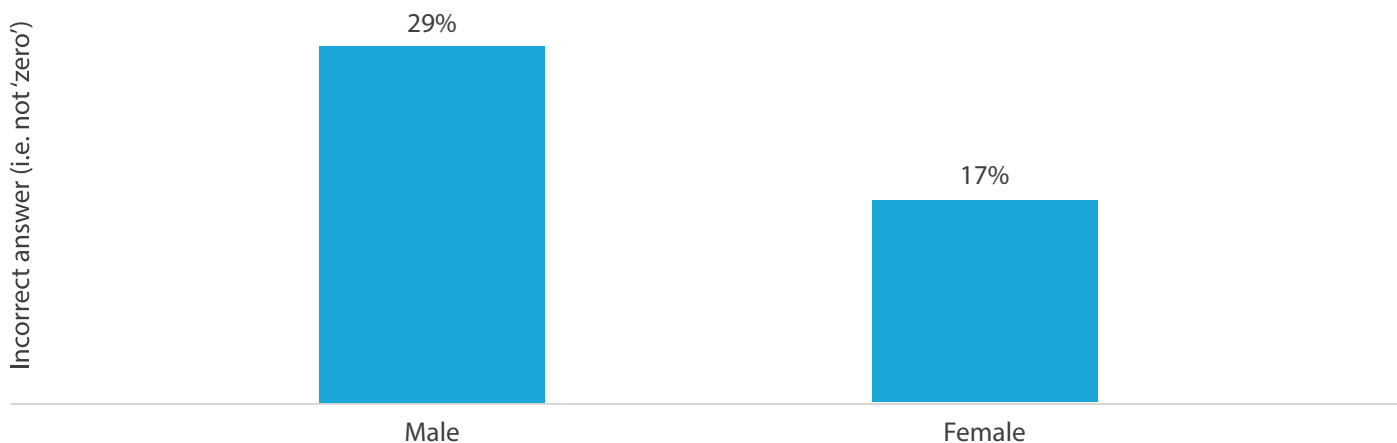


FIGURE 2. PROPORTION ANSWERING INCORRECTLY TO WHAT IS THE SAFEST NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS A PREGNANT WOMAN CAN CONSUME ON ANY ONE OCCASION TO AVOID HARM TO THE FETUS, BY GENDER*



*Results for those selecting 'other gender' are not displayed due to low sample size

Analysis by each Australian state and territory was also conducted, using representative samples. As Table 3 shows, the lack of awareness is particularly high in Victoria (26%), Queensland (25%) and New South Wales (24%).

TABLE 3. PROPORTION ANSWERING WHAT THEY THINK IS THE SAFEST NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS A PREGNANT WOMAN CAN CONSUME ON ANY ONE OCCASION TO AVOID HARM TO THE FETUS, BY STATE/TERRITORY* **

RESPONDENT ANSWERS	AUSTRALIA (%)	NSW (%)	ACT (%)	VIC (%)	TAS (%)	QLD (%)	SA (%)	WA (%)	NT (%)
Zero	77	76	82	74	81	75	84	84	79
One	7	8	7	10	6	6	4	4	7
Two	6	5	4	5	6	8	5	5	2
Three	2	2	1	2	1	3	1	2	1
Four	1	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	1
Five or more	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	6	5	5	7	6	6	5	6	9
<i>Subtotal for incorrect answers - one or more standard drinks and don't know</i>	23	24	18	26	19	25	16	16	21

*This question was asked of a reduced sample of 1,499 respondents as it was only asked of those who were aware of the NHMRC guidelines. Results are still representative with a minimum sample size of 100 for each state and territory

**Note that due to rounding, the subtotal may appear more or less than what is displayed in the table.

TOO MANY AUSTRALIANS ARE UNAWARE OF THE RISKS OF DRINKING ALCOHOL WHEN PREGNANT

When asked to identify the health conditions associated with alcohol use during pregnancy, Australians' level of awareness is low. Almost one third (30%) of Australians are unaware that drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause FASD (Table 4).

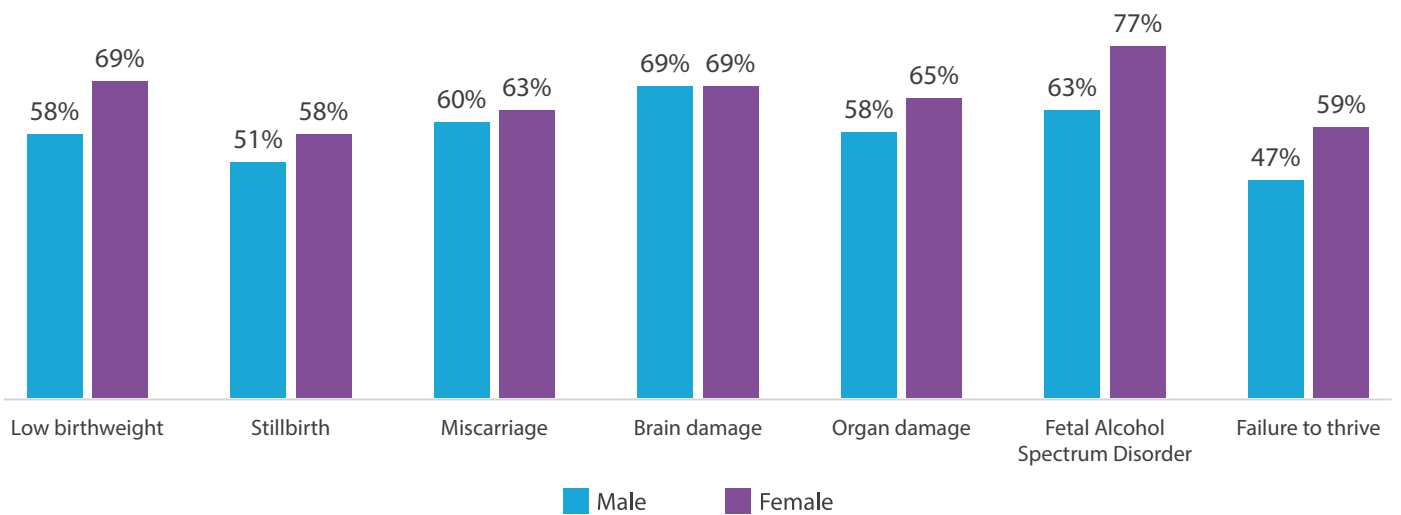
Australians' awareness that alcohol use during pregnancy can cause a failure to thrive for a newborn (lack of normal weight gain) is low at 53 per cent. Similarly, awareness that stillbirth is a potential consequence of drinking during pregnancy is only 54 per cent.

TABLE 4. AWARENESS OF WHICH HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY

HEALTH CONDITIONS	PROPORTION (%)
Low birthweight	64
Stillbirth	54
Miscarriage	62
Brain damage	69
Organ damage	62
FASD	70
Failure to thrive	53

Analysis by gender indicates significant differences in awareness. Men are less aware than women of health conditions associated with alcohol use during pregnancy, particularly FASD (63% male awareness, 77% females), as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 3. AWARENESS OF WHICH HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY, BY GENDER



There are significant differences in awareness across different age groups as shown in Table 5. People aged 25-34 have the lowest awareness (39% unaware) among all age groups that FASD is associated with alcohol use during pregnancy, closely followed by 18-24 year-olds (35% unaware).

TABLE 5. AWARENESS OF WHICH HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY, BY AGE GROUP

HEALTH CONDITION	18 TO 24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-49 (%)	50+ (%)
Low birthweight	59	55 ↓	59	71 ↑
Stillbirth	58	53	55	53
Miscarriage	69	61	64	59
Brain damage	74	65	63 ↓	72
Organ damage	68	62	61	61
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	65 ↓	61 ↓	68	77 ↑
Failure to thrive	50	52	51	57

*Arrows denote a statistically significant result, with an upward arrow indicating significantly higher than all other age categories, and downward significantly lower.

Analysis by state and territory, presented in Table 6, shows lack of awareness of FASD is particularly high in Victoria (33%) and New South Wales (32%).

TABLE 6. AWARENESS OF WHICH HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY, BY STATE/TERRITORY

HEALTH CONDITIONS	AUSTRALIA (%)	NSW (%)	ACT (%)	VIC (%)	TAS (%)	QLD (%)	SA (%)	WA (%)	NT (%)
Low birthweight	64	65	62	59	68	67	65	64	62
Stillbirth	54	58	56	52	60	55	51	50	52
Miscarriage	62	65	60	60	66	61	62	58	64
Brain damage	69	70	63	67	71	69	66	71	70
Organ damage	62	62	61	61	66	66	59	60	61
FASD	70	68	75	67	79	74	71	77	81
Failure to thrive	53	54	53	50	56	57	53	53	62
None of the above	6	6	7	8	6	3	7	6	4

WARNING LABELS ARE INVISIBLE TO MOST AUSTRALIANS

The poll also asked if people recalled seeing warning labels on alcohol products about the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy. Of concern, only 31 per cent of Australians recalled any labels. This indicates that current labelling is not visible, leaving people uninformed of the significant risks.

As Table 7 shows, recall is particularly low in Western Australia (25%), Tasmania (27%) and South Australia (30%).

TABLE 7. RECALL OF SEEING HEALTH WARNING LABELS ABOUT THE RISK OF DRINKING ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS ON ALCOHOL PRODUCTS, BY STATE/TERRITORY

	AUSTRALIA (%)	NSW (%)	ACT (%)	VIC (%)	TAS (%)	QLD (%)	SA (%)	WA (%)	NT (%)
Proportion of those who recalled seeing health warning labels	31	31	37	32	27	33	30	25	38

Analysis by household income and educational level indicate that those who are more socio-economically advantaged (i.e. higher income and higher level of education) have greater recall than those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

As Figure 4 shows, those who have completed a Bachelor Degree or a higher educational level have higher recall (35%) than those who have completed an educational level lower than a Bachelor Degree (e.g. a Certificate, Diploma or High School). As Figure 5 shows, recall is lower for those with lower household incomes, steadily increasing for those with higher household incomes.

FIGURE 4. RECALL OF SEEING WARNING LABELS ABOUT THE RISK OF DRINKING ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS ON ALCOHOL PRODUCTS, BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL ATTAINED

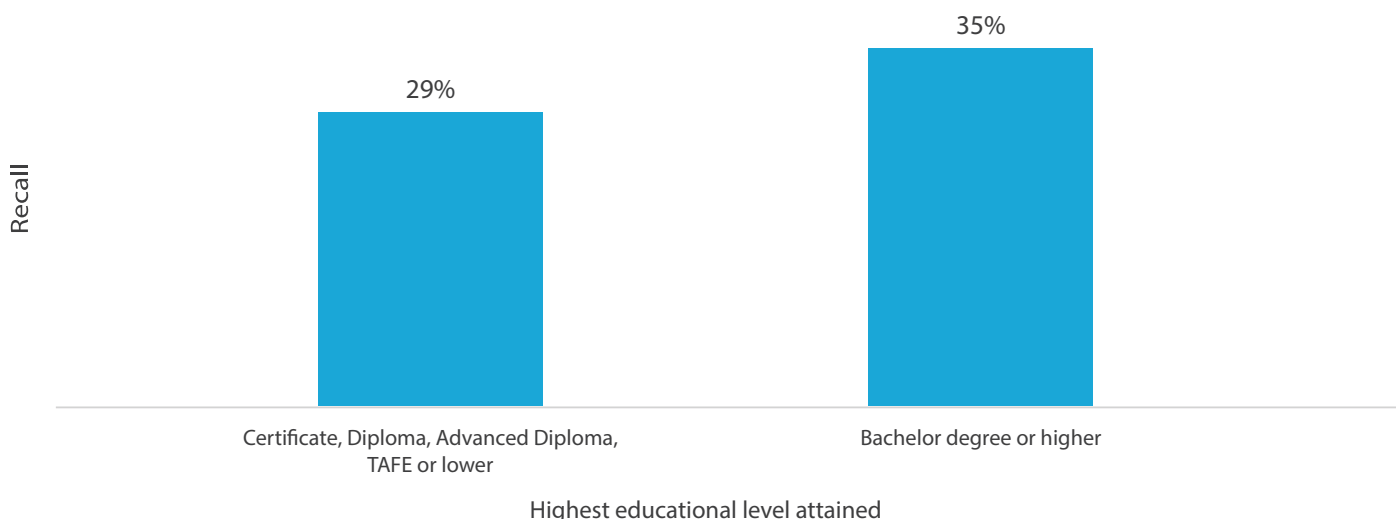


FIGURE 5. RECALL OF SEEING WARNING LABELS ABOUT THE RISK OF DRINKING ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS ON ALCOHOL PRODUCTS, BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME (BEFORE TAX)



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STOPPING HARM CAUSED BY ALCOHOL

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