# Alcohol health warning labels: Attitudes and perceptions

## Researcher

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## Summary

On 16 August 2011 the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) released its policy position on health warning labels and consumer information for alcohol products. The policy set out how alcohol health warning labels should be applied in Australia and the need to apply nutritional information to alcohol products.

In relation to health warning labels, the policy proposed that labels be mandated and applied to all alcohol products sold in Australia. In applying the labels, the following specifications were made:

* There should be at least five different health warning messages, with one message relating to the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy;
* Health warning labels should comprise both text and symbols;
* The size, font and application of health warning labels should be consistent across all products;
* Health warning labels should be applied to the front labels of alcohol products and be horizontally oriented; and
* Health warning labels should be preceded with the text “HEALTH WARNING”.

Based on these specifications, FARE produced five sample health warning labels. In preparation for the development of these labels, FARE commissioned Galaxy Research to conduct focus group testing and online market testing to determine Australian’s support of the health warning labels and the perception of their effectiveness in raising awareness and changing behaviours.

## Outcomes

There is strong support for the use of health warning labels on alcoholic beverages as a potential tool to raise awareness and prompt conversations about risks, and to encourage reductions in alcohol consumption. 58% of people surveyed indicated they support the use of health warning labels on alcoholic beverages.

When asked about who should develop and regulate health warning labels, there was clear support for both to be government led and not industry led. 52% of people surveyed thought the government must be involved in the development of health warning labels. 24% believed the alcohol industry should do this, and the remaining 24% thought another body should be involved or were unsure. Even more people supported government regulation of health warning labels, with 72% of people in favour of this. Only 12% believed the alcohol industry should regulate health warning labels.

When asked about FARE’s proposed health warning labels which encompassed the harms of drinking during pregnancy and links of alcohol use to injury, drink driving, cancer and brain damage, the majority of people surveyed believed each of these labels would raise awareness of and prompt conversation about the health risk in question. The majority of people (66%) also believed that the pregnancy health warning label would be effective in reducing alcohol consumption. 56% of people thought that FARE’s proposed health warning labels should be on the front of alcoholic beverages.

The results of this market testing also illustrate that while most people are aware of many of the harms caused by alcohol consumption, few are aware of how many standard drinks per day is a safe amount to drink to reduce the risk of these harms.

The vast majority of people surveyed knew that alcohol is linked to car accidents (89%), harm during pregnancy (85%), liver cancer (82%), damage to developing brains (81%) death (70%) and injury (69%). However, few people knew that alcohol is linked to mouth and throat cancer (32%) and breast cancer (15%).

Most people (around 67%) are aware of the existence of the 2009 National Health and Medical Research Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks of Drinking (NHMRC Guidelines). Only a minority of the people surveyed (18%) were aware of the existence of the Guidelines and familiar with their content. This suggests that 82% of people are not familiar with the content of the NHMRC Guidelines and consequently do not know how many standards drinks per day is a safe amount to drink to reduce the health risks of drinking.

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