# Hey Siri, can the alcohol industry be trusted?

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| **Author** | Michael Thorn |
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### The alcohol lobby’s shockingly cynical response to a serious national problem

Just ask Siri says the alcohol industry’s new mouthpiece Andrew Wilsmore in response to Food Standards Australia and New Zealand’s (FSANZ) release of the proposed standard for pregnancy warning labelling on al alcohol containers.

Unhappy about FSANZ’s draft proposals the new head of Alcohol Beverages Australia (ABA) [reportedly told T*he Age* newspaper](https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/alcohol-industry-resisting-proposed-pregnancy-warning-labels-20191014-p530mm.html?cspt=1571269535|0ecaf0b1d1262952f3cef0c2d27bd004) this week that putting too much information on a warning label risked confusing customers and may not be relevant to them.

Wilsmore was quoted saying:

“For us as an industry, we think the most important information the customer needs to know is alcohol content and the number of standard drinks in it…And the great thing is, in the modern age, you can just do a 'hey, Google' or 'hey, Siri' and bring up a whole lot of information ... specific to you and your circumstances."

https://twitter.com/DrOliviaDoll1/status/1184261293198303232

Unfortunately, asking Google Assistant or Apple’s Siri is just as likely to reveal more alcohol industry [misinformation](https://www.jsad.com/doi/abs/10.15288/jsad.2019.80.524) about the risks of consuming alcohol during pregnancy, according to British scientists who published new research this week.

Reporting on the research [*The Guardian* stated](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/14/alcohol-industry-pregnant-women-research-health):

*“Alcohol firms and bodies they fund are encouraging women to drink in pregnancy – putting their unborn child in danger – by publishing false and misleading information about the risks involved.”*

*“The alcohol industry is ignoring scientific evidence as part of a drive to ‘nudge’ mothers-to-be into drinking as part of a deliberate strategy to ensure women keep consuming their products because young people are turning away from them, researchers say.”*

The study compared information on alcohol consumption and fertility, pregnancy, and breastfeeding on the websites of 23 alcohol industry–funded bodies (including Drinkwise in Australia) and 19 public health organisations.

It found industry–funded organisations were significantly less likely than independent public health websites to provide information on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and less likely to advise that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

The researchers found industry-funded websites were also significantly more likely to emphasise uncertainties, and less likely to use direct language such as ‘don’t drink’.

[A Drinkwise campaign](https://fare.org.au/deceive-deny-delay-industry-lies-exposed-ahead-of-government-alcohol-roundtable/) which was corrected following advocacy from the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) was included in the research as an example of industry misinformation.

The research findings suggest that to protect their female alcohol market, alcohol industry-funded bodies use strategic ambiguity and other informational tactics to encourage women to continue drinking in pregnancy.

Professor Mark Petticrew, study author from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said:

*“It is essential that the public have access to health information that is easy to digest and complete. Alongside government-sponsored health websites, the alcohol industry also disseminates information on the risk of alcohol consumption on conceiving and pregnancy via corporate social responsibility organizations. We analysed this information to see how it was framed and if it gave the full picture. It frequently didn’t, and misrepresented the evidence on the risks.”*

There was no significant difference between alcohol industry–funded bodies and public health bodies in the likelihood of including general information on alcohol and pregnancy; however, there are many significant differences in terms of the specific information that is presented, and how it is presented.

In particular, the health sections of the websites of alcohol industry–funded organisations were significantly less likely than those of public health organisations to include information on most topics relevant to fertility, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and FASD.

In the case of FASD, fewer than half of alcohol industry–funded organisations included this information, compared with approximately 90 per cent of public health organisations. The websites of alcohol industry–related bodies were also significantly less likely to include information on most pregnancy-related harms.

The research identified how the alcohol industry–funded bodies highlight uncertainties in the evidence on health harms and frame those harms in such a way as to deflect responsibility from the industry itself. The researchers identified four such approaches: emphasising uncertainty and implying safety, framing information to emphasize individual responsibility, drinking patterns, and individual variation and choice,6 framing light drinking, drinking within guidelines, and abstention as equivalent options, and confounding: Focusing discussion away from alcohol to other risk factors.8

In the quantitative analysis comparing alcohol industry–funded and non–alcohol industry information, alcohol industry–related bodies were statistically significantly less likely to state that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy – for example there were half as likely to describe the risk of fetal alcohol syndrome, compared to independent organisations. Industry-funded organisations were also significantly less likely to include information about risk in the early stages of pregnancy.

Professor Petticrew said:

“Across alcohol industry–funded organizations, there appears to be a consistent strategy to the delivery of information on alcohol consumption and pregnancy. One possible reason is that women are a crucial part of the alcohol market. Pregnancy, therefore, may represent a significant commercial threat to the alcohol industry.”

“This study provides further evidence that these organisations pose a potential risk to public health, specifically to the health of pregnant women and the baby, and should have no role in disseminating health information.”

The research highlights that the flippant, dangerous response from Wilsmore to *The Age* when asked to comment on the soon-to-be compulsory pregnancy warning label is a well-worn tactic by the latest mouthpiece for big alcohol, designed to keep Australians from understanding the real risks associated with alcohol use and pregnancy.

### Metadata

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