

## AlcoholNZ article

### Title

#### **Alcohol pregnancy warning labels – Consumer awareness and understanding**

### At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's June 2017 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on [alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz](http://alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz)).
- It summarises key findings from HPA-commissioned research on consumer awareness and understanding of pregnancy warning labels on alcoholic beverage containers. Colmar Brunton conducted this research using an online survey. The full report of the research is available on [hpa.org.nz](http://hpa.org.nz).
- Few consumers (5%) recalled pregnancy warning labels without prompting, but with visual prompting more than 4 in 10 consumers (44%) recalled at least one of the three labels tested.
- Young women (67%) and women with children (51%) had the highest recall.
- The pictogram (an image of a pregnant woman holding a wine glass placed in a circle with a diagonal line through it) was reported as the most effective method of conveying the intended message.
- Consumers also wanted a clearer link between drinking while pregnant and harm to the unborn child. This was considered to be best achieved though the addition of text.

### Citation

Health Promotion Agency. (2017). Alcohol pregnancy warning labels – Consumer awareness and understanding. *AlcoholNZ* (7)1, p9–11.

# Alcohol pregnancy warning labels

## Consumer awareness and understanding

*Many New Zealand alcohol producers voluntarily display text and/or pictograms on alcohol beverage labels warning consumers not to drink alcohol while pregnant. Alcohol pregnancy warning labelling is one of a number of primary prevention strategies used to raise awareness of the importance of not drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Another is the Health Promotion Agency's (HPA's) Don't Know? Don't Drink social marketing campaign aimed at encouraging women not to drink alcohol if there is any chance they could be pregnant.*

A range of health agencies, including the Ministry of Health and HPA, endorse and promote the following key message (see [alcoholpregnancy.org.nz](http://alcoholpregnancy.org.nz) for a list of the agencies):

*Stop drinking alcohol if you could be pregnant, are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant.  
There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.*

Together, the endorsement message, warning labels on alcoholic beverages and campaign activities contribute to the implementation of the Government's 2016 action plan *Taking Action on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: 2016–2019*. In particular, they contribute to Action 2 of the Plan, which is to develop and disseminate clear, unambiguous and consistent messages to increase the whole community's awareness of the risks of drinking during pregnancy.

### Requirements for pregnancy warnings on labels

Some countries have mandatory pregnancy warning labelling requirements on packaged alcoholic products, while other countries have introduced voluntary labelling or have no requirements. New Zealand and Australia, who have a joint food regulation system and share food standards for labelling, currently have voluntary labelling of alcoholic beverages with health warnings about not drinking alcohol while pregnant. No standard statements or pictograms are formally specified.

An initial two-year trial of voluntary placement of pregnancy health warning labels on packaged alcoholic beverages was evaluated in both Australia and New Zealand in 2014. This led to a decision from the Australia and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation to extend voluntary labelling for a further two years to allow greater uptake, work on consistent messaging, and further evaluation. The Forum is due to reconsider voluntary uptake versus mandatory regulation of alcohol pregnancy warning labelling in late 2017. Evaluation reports and progress updates are available on [foodregulation.gov.au](http://foodregulation.gov.au).

## Research on consumer awareness and understanding

In 2016 HPA commissioned Colmar Brunton to conduct an online survey of consumers so that there would be some New Zealand-based consumer research to take into account when the pregnancy warning label issue is reconsidered in 2017. The report of the research findings, *Consumer Awareness and Understanding of Alcohol Pregnancy Warning Labels* (Rout & Hannan, 2016), was published on HPA's website – [hpa.org.nz](http://hpa.org.nz) – in October 2016.

The purpose of the research was to assess the effectiveness of current alcohol pregnancy warning labels, focusing on:

- consumer recall and awareness of the labelling on alcohol products
- reading and comprehension, or what consumers understand from current pregnancy warning labels.

An online survey was carried out in June 2016 with 1,488 consumers, including 387 women aged 18 to 34 years (young women) and 388 women with children under 15 years (women with children).

The following three pregnancy warning labels were tested:

- The 'pregnant lady' pictogram (an image of a pregnant woman holding a wine glass placed in a circle with a diagonal line through it) – a common, internationally used pictogram.

- 'IT IS SAFEST NOT TO DRINK WHILE PREGNANT' – DrinkWise Australia's labelling text that is commonly used in New Zealand.
- 'Don't drink pregnant' – alternative text that is sometimes used on Australian labels in conjunction with the pictogram.

The research findings, outlined below, were summarised using the criteria that the research literature recommends for assessing the effectiveness of warning labels.

### Attention to and recall of message

- Few consumers (5%) recalled pregnancy warning labels without prompting, but with visual prompting more than four in ten consumers (44%) recalled at least one of the three alcohol pregnancy labels tested.
- Young women (67%) and women with children (51%) had the highest recall (of at least one of the three labels tested).

### Reading and comprehension, and judgements of the product's risk and hazards

- The pictogram was reported as the most effective method of conveying the intended messages.
- However, consumers wanted a clearer link between drinking while pregnant and harm to the unborn child. This was considered to be best achieved through the addition of text.
- Most consumers (97%) associated the colour red with a warning.

### Behavioural compliance with the message

- Participants viewed the pictogram as the most effective warning label for prompting desired behaviours (eg, not drinking while pregnant and prompting people to talk about the risks).
- Further analysis found that young women had fairly similar views of the effectiveness of each of the three labels in prompting discussion about the risks. Women with children tended to view the alternative text as less effective than the other two labels.
- The DrinkWise text has the most potential for misinterpretation.

This research highlights the important role of pregnancy health warnings on alcoholic beverage labels in raising awareness of the risks and harms of drinking alcohol while pregnant or when planning a pregnancy. Overall, those who recalled the labels had a clear understanding of what they meant and many participants were prompted by the labels to consider the risks of drinking while pregnant and, for some, to discuss these risks with family and friends.

If you would like to read more, the full research report can be downloaded from HPA's website at [hpa.org.nz/research-library](http://hpa.org.nz/research-library).

## Reference

Rout, J., & Hannan, T. (2016). *Consumer awareness and understanding of alcohol pregnancy warning labels*. Retrieved from <http://www.hpa.org.nz/sites/default/files/Consumer%20awareness%20alcohol%20pregnancy%20warning%20label%20report%20FINAL.pdf>.