

Labeling alcoholic drinks as lower in strength could encourage people to drink more

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Credit: University of Cambridge

Wines and beers labelled as lower in alcohol strength may increase the total amount of alcoholic drink consumed, according to a study published in the journal *Health Psychology*. The study was carried out by

the Behaviour and Health Research Unit at the University of Cambridge in collaboration with the Centre for Addictive Behaviours Research at London South Bank University.

Alcohol is the fifth leading cause of disease and premature death both in the UK and globally. Reducing consumption of [alcohol](#) is a public health priority in many countries. In the UK, as part of a range of steps to reduce overall alcohol consumption, policymakers are currently interested in allowing industry to label a wider range of alcohol products as lower in alcohol.

Proposed legislative changes include extending the variety of terms that could be used to denote lower alcohol content, and extending the strength limit to include products lower than the current average on the market (12.9% ABV for [wine](#) and 4.2% ABV for beer*).

"For lower strength alcohol products to reduce consumption, consumers will need to select them in place of equal volumes of higher strength products," says Dr Milica Vasiljevic from the University of Cambridge. "But what if the lower strength products enable people to feel they can consume more?"

In this study, two-hundred and sixty-four weekly wine and beer drinkers - sampled from a representative panel of the general population of England - were randomised to one of three groups to taste test drinks in a laboratory designed to mimic a bar environment. The drinks varied only in the label displayed. In one group participants taste-tested drinks labelled 'Super Low' and '4%ABV' for wine or '1%ABV' for beer. In another group the drinks were labelled 'Low' and '8%ABV' for wine or '3%ABV' for beer. In the final group participants taste-tested drinks labelled with no verbal descriptors of strength, but displaying the average strength on the market - wine ('12.9%ABV') or [beer](#) ('4.2%ABV').

The results showed the total amount of drink consumed increased as the label on the drink denoted successively lower alcohol strength. The mean consumption of drinks labelled 'Super Low' was 214ml, compared with 177ml for regular (unlabelled) drinks. Individual differences in [drinking](#) patterns and socio-demographic indicators did not affect these results.

"Labelling lower strength alcohol may sound like a good idea if it encourages people to switch drinks, but our study suggests it may paradoxically encourage people to drink more," says Professor Theresa Marteau, senior author and Director of the Behaviour and Health Research Unit.

While this study shows that people may drink more if drinks are labelled as lower in strength, the researchers do not yet know if this effect is sufficient to result in the consumption of more units of alcohol overall from lower strength alcohol drinks. Furthermore, participants in this study were tested in a bar-laboratory setting. To learn more about the impact of lower [strength](#) alcohol labelling, research in real-world settings is needed.

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More information: Vasiljevic M, Couturier DL, Frings D, Moss AC, Albery IP, Marteau TM. 'Impact of lower strength alcohol labeling on consumption: A randomized controlled trial'. *Health Psychology*. [DOI: 10.1037/hea0000622](https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000622)

*ABV denotes alcohol by volume, the standard measure of how much alcohol is contained in a given volume of an alcoholic drink.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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