



Alcohol labeling: A tool to inform consumers about alcohol's link to cancer

What effects do alcohol warning labels have on public awareness and drinking behaviours?

In 2017–2018, the first real-world study was conducted in Canada to test if alcohol warning labels on alcohol containers were an effective tool for increasing public awareness of alcohol-related health risks and reducing per capita alcohol use.¹⁻⁶

The intervention included labels with three rotating messages¹⁻⁶:

1. a cancer warning,
2. Canada's national low-risk drinking guidelines, and
3. the number of standard drinks in containers of wine, spirits, beer and cider.

Liquor store staff applied the labels to containers in the government liquor store in Whitehorse, Yukon for a four-month period. Researchers assessed the impacts of these labels on consumers by examining alcohol sales data and consumer responses in Whitehorse compared to neighbouring regions of Yukon and Northwest Territories, where labelling practices remained unchanged.¹⁻⁶

Key results¹⁻⁶

- About 300,000 labels were applied to 98% of alcohol containers sold in the liquor store in Whitehorse over the study period.
- Prior to the new labels, 25% of participants in Whitehorse and Yellowknife believed alcohol can cause cancer, 35% were aware of Canada's national drinking guidelines, and 14% were able to accurately estimate the number of standard drinks in an alcohol container.
- After the new labels were introduced in the main liquor store in Whitehorse, **consumer awareness of alcohol's cancer risk and Canada's national drinking guidelines increased** in Whitehorse compared to Yellowknife, where no new labels had been added.
- Consumers who became **aware that alcohol can cause cancer were twice as likely to express support for policies to increase the price of low-cost alcohol** as compared to those who were unaware of the alcohol-cancer link.
- Using alcohol sales data, **average per capita alcohol consumption decreased by 6%** in Whitehorse during the study period compared to neighbouring regions of Yukon and Northwest Territories.

What key design elements should be included when developing effective alcohol warning labels?

In the same study, key design elements were considered when developing alcohol warning labels, such as:¹⁻⁶

1. **Size:** the labels were relatively large with large font.
2. **Position:** the labels were highly visible on alcohol containers and used pictograms.

- 3. Colour:** the labels had a bright yellow background with a red border.
- 4. Health messages:** rotating messages were new and relatively unknown to the public and included direct messages with guidelines about how to drink safer and compelling reasons for why Canadians should comply with guidelines.
- 5. Language:** the labels included both English and French, the two official languages in Canada.

Intervention Alcohol Labels (actual size 3.2cm x 5.0cm)



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