

# Longitudinal Study of Awareness, Recall, and Acceptance of Alcohol Warning Labels

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This research reports the results of a 5-year (1989-1993) longitudinal study on consumer awareness of warning messages on alcoholic beverage containers. Adjusting for false positives, about one-third of respondents in the 1993 survey were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to believe that alcoholic beverages containers contain warning messages. However, reported awareness has shown only a small increase since 1991. Respondents were also asked to indicate the content of the warning message. Adjusting for false positives, about one-quarter of respondents mentioned either the birth defects or driving warnings. Recall of the birth defects message has shown steady growth, while recall of the driving message has failed to increase since 1991. The rate of learning about alcohol warnings varied by education level; more educated respondents learned about the warnings more quickly than did less educated respondents. Recall was greatest among young and "heavy" consumption segments; about 40 percent of respondents in these two segments recalled at least one of the warning messages.

The Alcoholic Beverage and Labeling Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-690) required all alcoholic beverage containers to bear the following warning label by November 18, 1989:

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Government Warning: (1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems.

Research indicates that the public is aware of the pregnancy, driving, and other health risks associated with alcoholic beverage consumption (Hilton & Kaskutas, 1991). Therefore, the legislation sought to provide a "clear, nonconfusing reminder" by reactivating information already contained in consumers' memories. For the label to be an effective reminder, the public and alcoholic beverage consumers, specifically, would have to become aware of its existence and would have to be informed about the information in the label.

Studies have shown that awareness of the warning label during the first 2 years (1990 and 1991) has been moderate at best (Hilton, 1993). For example, national surveys have indicated that only about one-quarter of the population, after adjusting for estimated "false positive" responses, was aware of the warning label by 1991 (Greenfield, Graves & Kaskutas, 1993). "False positive" responses were assessed by measuring the proportion of the population indicating awareness of the warning message *before* the label appeared on alcoholic beverage containers.

The failure of the alcohol warning label to achieve a high awareness level is evidence that mere inclusion of a warning label on a consumer product does not assure rapid communication of the mandated message. However, these "early" results may underestimate the ultimate effectiveness of the warning label because several years may be required for this information to diffuse throughout the population (Kinnear, Taylor & Gur-Arie, 1983).

Reported awareness levels have been somewhat higher for certain subgroups. For example, a 1990 study reported that respondents who were younger, had higher incomes, and were heavier drinkers tended to have the highest levels of warning message awareness (Mazis, Morris & Swasy, 1991). In a 1991 survey, higher levels of warning label awareness were found among men, 18 to 29 year olds, heavy drinkers, and more educated respondents (Graves, 1993)

In addition, a study reported greater warning message awareness among nonMormons than among Mormons in Utah (Scammon, Mayer & Smith, 1991). A 1993 study of pregnant inner-city women found that reported higher levels of warning label awareness among women consuming at least .5 ounce of alcohol per day and among women under 30 years of age (Hankin et al., 1994).

In this study, we report the results of surveys conducted over a 5-year period. Each survey examines reported awareness of the alcohol warning and measures recall of the pregnancy and drinking messages for the noninstitutionalized U.S. population and for major population subgroups. The analyses focus on warning label awareness differences across these subgroups and on changes in warning label awareness over time. The open-ended recall measure provides a conservative assessment of respondents' knowledge of warning message information. In contrast, previous research has used a recognition measure, which may overstate consumer knowledge because respondents may guess successfully whether a statement presented actually appears on the warning label (Greenfield et al., 1993; Graves, 1993; Hankin et al., 1994).

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