

# Zero alcohol drinks.

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## **In Australia we're seeing a rise in the popularity of drinks with little or no alcohol content that mimic the flavour, style and packaging of traditional alcoholic drinks.**

The growing interest in these products has caught the attention of the media, who are questioning how zero alcohol drinks might fit into 'sober curious' and 'mindful drinking' trends.<sup>1</sup>

Early analysis suggests zero alcohol drinks can be beneficial for people who are looking to cut back their drinking. However, potential benefits need to be balanced with concerns being raised by public health advocates, including that:

- Some adults might be drinking zero alcohol products in addition to their current alcohol consumption, rather than as a substitute.
- Zero alcohol products are being marketed as appropriate in situations where alcohol isn't appropriate, such as when swimming, driving or operating machinery, which works to normalise use.
- Zero alcohol drinks are also being used to increase awareness and acceptability of alcohol products and brands among young people.
- This increased exposure to zero alcohol products being consumed across an extended range of activities might confuse children who may think alcohol is being drunk more frequently than it is, overall working to further normalise alcohol use.
- Young people who consume zero alcohol drinks might have an increased likelihood of drinking alcohol, and starting to drink it at an earlier age.<sup>2</sup>

## **WHAT ARE ZERO ALCOHOL DRINKS?**

'Zero alcohol drinks' is essentially marketing terminology for 'products mimicking alcohol', which can be defined as:

*A beverage containing less than 0.5% alcohol by volume (ABV) that features the branding of established alcohol companies, and/or is designed to imitate the flavour, packaging, or overall appearance of alcohol products.*

Other names include:

- zero alcohol products
- zero alcohol beverages
- alcohol-free drinks
- no alcohol drinks
- non-alcoholic drinks or non-alcoholic beer/wine/spirits.

Although commonly used, these terms are technically incorrect.

They fail to capture two important points:

- Some of these products contain small amounts of alcohol.
- These products are specifically designed to imitate the flavour and appearance of alcoholic drinks. For instance, while Coca-Cola could technically be classified as a 'zero alcohol drink', it is clearly not trying to copy – or mimic – products containing alcohol.

Although recognising it's technically incorrect, we will use the term 'zero alcohol drinks' here for simplicity.

Zero alcohol beers and wines have been sold for decades, but companies are now claiming better flavour and quality and they have also started copying craft beers and spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Zero alcohol drinks are being sold in store and online by existing alcohol companies as product extensions (e.g., Heineken 0.0 or Carlton Zero), or by new companies who specialise in zero alcohol drinks.

They're also available in many supermarket and grocery store chains.



## HOW MUCH ARE AUSTRALIANS DRINKING?

The most recent **National Drug Strategy Household Survey** in 2019<sup>i</sup> revealed some interesting trends on how we've changed our drinking patterns over time:

- 52% of people were taking action to reduce their drinking – the highest it's ever been
- half of those (52%) wanted to cut back on drinking to improve their health
- the number of people drinking daily and weekly was at its lowest point since 2001
- the actions people took to reduce their drinking included:
  - having less drinks on a drinking occasion
  - reducing the overall number of drinking occasions
  - stopping their drinking altogether
  - drinking more low-alcohol drinks.<sup>4</sup>

These results suggest there's increasing awareness of the health risks posed by alcohol, and many people are looking for ways they can reduce this risk.

<sup>i</sup> The National Drug Strategy Household Survey is held every 3 years. The next survey is schedule to be done **this year** – so the current data is subject to change.

## Are zero alcohol drinks a healthier alternative?

This depends on how people choose to drink them.

For people who are looking to cut back their drinking, but like the taste of alcohol or enjoy the social or habitual aspects of drinking (e.g., having a drink after work or with meals), drinking zero alcohol products instead of alcoholic drinks could be a good alternative that's more beneficial for their health. This would be known as substitution.

However, if these products are being consumed in addition to alcohol, rather than as a substitute – it is unlikely to provide much health benefit. For example, someone might have a zero alcohol drink instead of a soft drink or coffee, or in situations where they wouldn't usually drink any beverage (e.g. while driving). In either of these scenarios, the persons regular alcohol consumption is unaffected.

Zero alcohol drinks may also be risky for people who have previously experienced issues with alcohol.

Exposure to drinking cues and drinking settings has been found to be a strong predictor of relapse among abstaining drinkers. As most products have a near identical taste, smell and appearance to alcohol, they could be a potential trigger for someone who has recently given up drinking.<sup>5</sup>

**Sober in the Country's** Shanna Whan highlights the inherent tension posed by zero alcohol drinks.

As someone who previously experienced a dependence on alcohol, she reflected that: "I see a tremendous fit for zero-alc options in our backyard in the bush, and the many benefits of choice."

But, at the same time, she revealed she suffered a near-fatal relapse from consuming zero alcohol products. She said: "I simply never even thought it through...how using an imitation option could play out."<sup>5</sup> She goes on to state that "It's also deeply concerning to see people marketing them as a great way to cut back on alcohol. For some it absolutely can be. For others – it's a disaster. And that distinction **MUST** be made."<sup>5</sup>

Read more about her story [here](#).



## Impact on children and young people

### EXPOSURE THROUGH ADVERTISING AND SUPERMARKETS

Young people are already exposed to alcohol advertising daily – on billboards, on public transport and on TV (especially during sporting events).

On top of this, young people are now seeing multiple ads about zero alcohol drinks and seeing these products being sold in supermarkets.

Although these products are low to no alcohol, seeing them on TV and in supermarkets is creating extra brand exposure for big alcohol companies. Supermarkets in particular are promoting alcohol brands in shopping aisles where young people previously would not have been exposed to them.

Many advertising campaigns are also portraying zero alcohol drinks as something to drink in addition to alcohol; rather than as a substitute – and in situations where it is illegal or dangerous to drink alcohol. <sup>6,7</sup>

Heineken's ad campaign for 'Heineken 0.0' actually uses the tag line: "That moment you couldn't have a beer... now you can", with their ads showing people drinking Heineken 0.0 while driving a car, preparing to drive a boat with a water-skiing friend, and during a work meeting. <sup>8</sup>

Because these products look virtually identical to alcoholic drinks, some people (especially children) may find it difficult to tell the difference.

Children as young as two can recognise alcohol by the smell or appearance of the bottle, but can't yet read or understand the significance of a label's colour. <sup>9-11</sup> This could mean young people might assume alcohol is being consumed more frequently than it is, and in situations where it's high risk and/or illegal.

This poses a risk for children's developing social norms around when, and where, it is appropriate to drink alcohol. <sup>12</sup>



### EARLY DRINKING HABITS

It's hard to know how zero alcohol products might affect children and young people under 18 who drink them.

But, there's a risk in consuming a drink which looks, smells, and tastes like alcohol.

Developing an early habit of drinking a zero alcohol drink may transition to regularly drinking alcohol later.

For example, a young person who sees their parents having a couple of beers or wines after work or with dinner, could do the same with a zero alcohol drink. And, the habit and expectation of that regular drink could become well established.

As they become older, it would be a smooth transition to drinking alcohol instead.

This long-established habit may also be difficult for the young person to break if they want to reduce their alcohol consumption in the future.

## Alcohol industry motives

While it's true zero alcohol drinks are a better alternative to alcoholic drinks, this doesn't mean the alcohol industry is 'looking after' the health of Australians.

In fact, the industry is well-known for actively opposing evidence-based public health efforts that threaten their profitability.

This includes alcohol marketing regulation, the release of the updated National Health and Medical Council's alcohol guidelines, the introduction of a minimum unit price for alcohol in the Northern Territory, and pregnancy warning labels on alcohol. <sup>13-16</sup> You can read about all of this in the below articles:

- [Public health vs 'Big Alcohol' profits](#)
- [Minimum unit pricing vs 'big alcohol' profits](#)
- [Pregnancy warnings on alcohol just make sense](#)

In the case of zero alcohol drinks, they're already an industry success - regardless of how people consume them.

If someone is substituting, they might just be swapping a Heineken for a Heineken 0.0.

In the case of adding, they might continue drinking the same number of regular Heinekens and additionally drink Heineken 0.0 at times when they didn't previously drink.

Brands such as Heineken and Carlton have made it clear with their **marketing campaigns** that they want people to drink their zero alcohol products in addition to their current alcohol consumption – and in situations where it’s not legal or safe to drink alcohol – such as driving or boating.

Neither is positioning their zero alcohol products as a ‘healthier’ substitute.

It’s worth noting there are smaller companies selling zero alcohol drinks only, and they are not currently owned by parent alcohol corporations.

However, the recent acquisition of Seedlip, an early producer of zero alcohol drinks, by alcohol industry giant Diageo is an indication of what the industry might do in the future.<sup>17</sup>

## What can we do to prevent and reduce harm?

Although the impact of zero alcohol drinks is not well known yet, we can still take action to reduce the possibility of harm – an idea underpinned by the ‘precautionary principle’.<sup>ii</sup>

Some simple strategies would include:

- For people looking to cut back their drinking, or role model good behaviour for their kids, zero alcohol drinks can be avoided in situations where you wouldn’t normally drink alcohol. For more information on lower risk drinking, see the **(NHMRC) Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol**.
- People under 18 shouldn’t be sold or encouraged to consume zero alcohol drinks.
- People who have experienced an alcohol dependence should be made aware of zero alcohol drinks being a potential trigger for relapse.

Embracing mindful drinking has become a key part of life for many Australians, and zero alcohol drinks can play a role in this.

However, this should not come at the expense of those who are most vulnerable to the saturation of alcohol brands and their products in our daily lives.

## Help and Support

If you’re worried about yourself or somebody’s use of alcohol, there is support available:

### DrugInfo

**1300 85 85 84**

Free, confidential and non-judgmental telephone and email information, advice and referral service for alcohol and other drug-related enquiries.

### National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline

**1800 250 015**

24-hour phonenumber that offers telephone counselling, information, support and referral to treatment services for anyone seeking help for their own, or another person’s, alcohol or drug use.

### Family Drug Help (VIC, SA, TAS)

**1300 660 068**

### Family Drug Support (NSW, ACT, QLD)

**1300 368 186**

### Parent and Family Drug Support Line (WA)

**1800 653 203**

If you are affected by someone’s alcohol or drug use you can contact any of the above 24-hour helplines for information, support, counselling, and educational programs.

### Path2Help

[adf.org.au/path2help](http://adf.org.au/path2help)

Path2Help is an intuitive online tool designed to help you find local support and information tailored to the specific needs of your loved ones who use alcohol and other drugs.

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ii The precautionary principle provides guidance for public health and policy decisions in instances where there is a credible potential for harm but uncertainty around impacts. It is often explained as: “When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically”.

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