Can promotion of lower alcohol products help reduce alcohol consumption?

A rapid literature review
Summary

• What are the public health benefits of lower alcohol products?

Lowering the alcohol content of drinks offers health benefits for drinkers and at a population level, policies that promote the production and consumption of lower alcohol products have the potential to contribute to reductions in alcohol-related harms.

• Is market demand for lower alcohol products related to substitution (replacement of a stronger product in the same category) or addition (such products add to or increase the number of situations in which alcohol is consumed)?

Evidence for a substitution effect following the introduction of lower alcohol products to the market is lacking. Public health advocates have concerns that their introduction may primarily be additive and encourage drinkers to increase the number of situations in which alcohol is consumed. The impact of Finnish alcohol policy demonstrates that substitution is more likely to take place if the availability of strong alcoholic beverages is restricted alongside increases in the availability of lower alcohol products.

• Can consumers be encouraged to switch from higher to lower alcohol products?

Few published studies have examined drinker’s perceptions and acceptance of lower alcohol products. Although experimental studies have shown that beer drinkers find it hard to discriminate between regular and low strength beers, in ‘real world’ settings, persuading consumers to switch to lower alcohol products is unlikely to be straightforward.

• How can alcohol policy developments encourage the production and consumption of lower alcohol products?

The consensus within the international public health community is towards the use of taxation policies as a means of incentivising the production and consumption of lower alcohol products. In the UK, legislation was introduced last year to provide a new duty on beer to encourage the production and consumption of low strength beers. However, from a public health perspective, substitution is more likely to take place if the availability of strong alcoholic beverages is restricted alongside increases in the availability of lower alcohol products. In addition, government action on a single product category limits the effect that such policy developments may have on population level harms.

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Introduction

Per capita alcohol consumption in the UK

Revenue receipts from alcohol duties show that per capita consumption of alcohol has increased in the UK over the last 20 years, reaching a peak of 11.8 litres of pure alcohol per year in 2004/05 (Figure 1; HM Revenue & Customs 2010). Although consumption has declined in recent years, levels of abstinence have also increased. Consequently, how much of the decline is actually related to drinkers consuming less alcohol and how much to an increasing proportion of the population not drinking at all remains unclear (Bellis et al., 2009). Regardless, per capita consumption across the UK remains almost twice the global average (6.1 litres per capita consumption; WHO, 2011). Clearance data (based on sales taxes) shows a sustained increase in the consumption of wine and cider over the past 20 years and a steady decline in beer consumption (Figure 1; HM Revenue & Customs 2010). A recent study (Hughes et al., 2011) showed that among UK females on a night out, spirits accounted for over half of all grams of alcohol consumed. Alongside these changes in drinking preference, there has been a shift in the buying and consuming of alcohol in pubs and restaurants to buying in off-licenses and supermarkets for consumption at home (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2010).

![Figure 1. Alcohol consumption based on clearances per adult aged 16 and over in the UK](source: HM Revenue & Customs (2010))

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Patterns of harm by product type

Studies of the risks associated with different alcohol beverage types suggest that higher concentration beverages carry greater risks. In a US study, consumption patterns were shown to be strong predictors of beverage preference, with preference for beer associated with frequent drinking, preference for beer and spirits with heavy single occasion drinking and preference for wine associated with consuming smaller quantities (Gruenewald et al., 2000). A study of moderate drinkers in Denmark found that participants who reported a preference for beer tended to have an increased risk of becoming heavy and excessive drinkers compared to participants who reported a preference for wine (Jensen et al., 2002). Analysis of a national Australian survey (Stockwell et al., 2008) found that in terms of their contribution to risky alcohol consumption, regular strength beer (5% ABV) made the largest overall contribution (making up at least a third of risky consumption), spirits less than a third, wine around a quarter, with other beverages making up the remainder. Low- and mid-strength beers were less likely to have been consumed on risky drinking days. Other studies have linked beer consumption with drink driving (Mann et al., 2006), and beer and spirit consumption with violence (Chavira et al., 2011; Zimmerman & Benson, 2007; Rossow, 2001). However, these results should be interpreted with caution as beverage specific risks may be due to cultural differences, contextual effects or may be caused by beverage specific alcohol policies (Giesbrecht et al., 2012).

Supply and demand for lower alcohol products

“...It may be hypothesized that a specific type of beverage is a proxy for a combination of lifestyle, drinking patterns, drinking contexts, and access to alcohol, which, combined with high intakes of ethanol, contribute to increased risk.”

Giesbrecht et al. (2012: 83)

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Although not a new product category, in response to consumers becoming more health conscious and increasing consumer demand for ‘healthier’ products (ICAP, 2007), alcohol producers and retailers have sought to expand their lower alcohol product ranges in recent years. Lower alcohol content alternatives to common brands of beer, lager and cider have been available for some time and new products continue to be introduced to the market. Many alcohol producers also provide alcohol free (≤0.5% ABV) and non-alcoholic (0% ABV) beers, lagers and ciders. The production of lower alcohol products is constrained by European regulations; for example, European Commission (EC) wine regulations apply to winemaking and labelling provisions (Food Standards Agency, 2011; Box 1), for example, they specify the minimum and maximum alcoholic strengths for a product to be labelled as wine, and EC regulations had previously restricted the use of experimental techniques to reduce the alcohol content of wine (e.g. by reverse osmosis or spinning cone technologies). Alongside these technical and marketing challenges in the production and sale of reduced alcohol wine and wines with naturally lower alcohol content, over the last decade, the alcohol content of wine has been rising significantly around the world. Research suggests that the rising alcohol content of wine is primarily man made rather than driven by climate change (Alston et al., 2011).

Box 1. Wine labelling and the true alcohol content of wines

EU regulations allow wines sold in the UK to be labelled with an ABV within 0.5% of the actual alcoholic strength (Food Standards Agency, 2011). Based on a recent study by the American Association of Wine Economists (Alston et al., 2011), on average, the true alcohol content on wine labels is understated by about 0.39% for Old World wines and about 0.45% for New World wines. Systematic errors in the alcohol content of wine, therefore, may limit the public health impact of strategies that encourage the production of wines with lower alcohol content.

Alcohol consumers primarily choose drinks based on availability, cost, taste, mood and occasion, rather than alcohol content (ICAP, 2007) and market demand for products with a lower alcohol content may be related to: (i) substitution, that is the substitution or replacement of a stronger product in the same category; or (ii) addition, whereby lower alcohol products add to or increase the number of situations in which alcohol is consumed. Although profit and improved health are possible outcomes of lowering the alcohol content of drinks (Anderson et al., 2011), there are concerns that the promotion of products with a lower alcohol content may primarily be additive, leading consumers to drink in higher quantities to compensate for decreased alcohol content. In a study of the effects of

"Our analysis... suggests that in many places the rise in alcohol content of wine is a nuisance consequence of choices made [by winemakers] in response to evolving [consumer] demand for wine having more intense, riper flavours.”

Alston et al. (2011: 19)
introducing a new low strength beer to the Norwegian market, Skog (1988) found some evidence for substitution; however the increase in the low strength beer market was small.

Experimental studies have shown that beerdrinkers find it hard to discriminate between regular and low strength beer (McLaughlin, 1988; Segal & Stockwell, 2009). A study that compared drinking behaviour at US college student parties during which free unmarked lower alcohol alternatives were provided alongside free high strength beers found that the students consumed similar quantities and that consumers of the lower alcohol products had significantly lower Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) levels (Geller et al., 1991). A recent study by Segal and Stockwell (2009) replicated these findings, showing that an unmarked low strength beer was highly acceptable among young male beer drinkers. However, in a beer discrimination study, McLaughlin (1988) noted that young male beer drinkers placed a greater importance on refreshment and alcoholic effect than taste, implying that the task of persuading them to switch to lower strength beers did not appear promising.

Few published studies are available on consumer perception of other lower alcohol content products, however, in relation to wine, the research that is available suggests that consumer perception and acceptance of the quality of reduced alcohol wines based on thermal distillation techniques have generally been unfavourable (Schmidtke et al., 2011).

**Promoting the production and consumption of lower alcohol content products**

Public health strategies to promote the consumption of lower alcohol beers, wines and spirits have generally focused on the value of taxation policies to provide price incentives for lower alcohol products. Other strategies have included governments working directly with the alcohol industry and the implementation of restrictions on the sale of higher strength products.

**Taxation policies**

In Australia, clear tax incentives have been shown to encourage the production and consumption of lower alcohol products. In the 1980s, states and territories introduced reduced tax rates for low strength beer (<3% ABV) which were translated into lower retail prices (Stockwell & Crosbie, 2001). Sales of low strength beers increased significantly and now make up around 20% of the total Australian beer

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increases in certain types of drinking occasions (including the introduction of medium strength beers to grocery stores, resulting in significant decreases in overall alcohol consumption and a reduction in alcohol sales in the sale of medium strength beers, only allowing the sale of low strength beer (<4% ABV) in supermarkets, petrol stations and convenience stores. In Oklahoma, high strength beers can be sold only in off-licences and in 2003, around 98% of beer sold was <4% ABV (ICAP, 2007).

Examination of the impact of alcohol policies in Sweden and Finland also provide a useful research perspective on the restriction of higher alcohol products. In Sweden, abolition of the sale of medium strength beer in grocery stores in July 1977 was followed by a reduction in overall alcohol consumption and a reduction in alcohol-related harm among young people (Ramstedt, 2002). Conversely, liberalisation of alcohol availability in Finland in 1969, including the introduction of medium strength beers to grocery stores, resulted in significant increases in drinking occasions (Mustonen & Sund, 2002). These effects were additive; increases in certain types of drinking occasions did not result in significant decreases in

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other types of drinking occasions. Further analysis by Österberg (2012) has also concluded that changes in alcohol consumption were additive after medium strength beer sales began in grocery stores, finding no switch from stronger alcoholic beverages to medium strength beer among drinkers.

More recently, an Australian study (Lesjack, 2009) reported on the effects of a voluntary agreement to sell only low or mid strength beer or spirits and no full strength beer or spirits over the St Patrick’s race weekend. Compared to previous years, there appeared to be a reduction in the number of intoxicated people attending the races and a drop in the number of emergency department presentations from the previous year.

**Working with the alcohol industry**

The Scottish Government and Alcohol Industry Partnership was formed in 2007 as a means of working together to address alcohol misuse and promote responsible drinking in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2007). As part of the partnership, individual companies agreed to pilot lower alcohol alternatives in the Scottish market and to investigate the promotion of no alcohol alternatives in the retail sector. As part of this initiative, Guinness Mid-Strength® was trialled in selected outlets for three months. However, although consumers appeared to view the product favourably, consumer interest was not sufficient for the product to be considered commercially scalable (The Scottish Government Alcohol Industry Partnership, 2010). However, in January 2012, Diageo announced plans to launch the product in “select off-trade outlets” from February of this year.

**Conclusions**

Lower alcohol products have been commercially available for many years, and in recent years, producers have sought to extend their ranges due to increasing consumer demand for ‘healthier’ products. Lowering the alcohol content of drinks offers health benefits for drinkers and at a population level, policies that promote the production and consumption of lower alcohol products have the potential to contribute to reductions in alcohol-related harms.

Of primary concern from a public health perspective is that the introduction of lower alcohol products may be primarily additive and increase the number of situations in which alcohol is consumed (for example, low strength beers have been marketed as “the ideal lunchtime pint”). Few published studies have examined drinker’s perceptions and acceptance of lower alcohol products. Although experimental studies have shown that beer drinkers find it hard to discriminate between regular and low strength beers, persuading consumers to switch to lower alcohol products is not straightforward, and evidence for a substitution effect following their introduction to the market is lacking.

The consensus within the international public health community is towards the use of taxation policies as a means of incentivising the production and consumption of lower alcohol products.

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alcohol products. In Australia, following the introduction of reduced tax rates, the market for low strength beer increased significantly and in the UK, legislation was introduced last year to provide a new duty on beer to encourage the production and consumption of low strength beers. However, substitution is more likely to take place if the availability of high strength alcoholic beverages is restricted alongside increases in the availability of lower alcohol alternatives. There has been a steady decline in beer consumption in the UK with parallel increases in wine and cider consumption and encouraging production and consumption of lower alcohol products in a single product category is unlikely to maximise effects on population level harms.

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References


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