

Fact Sheet

VicHealth National Community Attitudes Survey: awareness and behaviours of low carb beer drinkers

December 2010

This survey, conducted online in July 2010, provides evidence that Australian low carbohydrate beer drinkers mistakenly believe these beverages are a healthier choice than other varieties.

'Low carb' beer was introduced to the Australian market around 2004. There are now more than 30 low carb beer varieties, with more introduced every summer. Low carb beer now makes up 8.8 per cent of the alcohol market. Originally marketed to appeal to health conscious women, low carb beer is now popular with men and women of all ages and backgrounds.

Intent

Nutritionists and alcohol experts have long suspected that low carb drinkers choose these products for supposed health benefits – primarily for weight management. However, there is little solid evidence to date about why these beers are the fastest growing alcohol category in Australia. This research, the first of its kind, sought to discover the reason behind the low carb beer craze and ultimately, whether the 'low carb' label creates the false impression that it is a healthier choice.

Survey

The survey focused on:

- who drinks low carb beer
- why they drink low carb beer
- how much they consume.

Respondents

The survey was taken online by 500 low carb beer drinkers aged 18 years and over across Australia who were registered to participate as part of an online survey panel by Research Now. Participants were evenly spread across all states and territories in line with current population distribution. Three-quarters of the respondents were female, but the answers were similar between both sexes.

Key Findings

Who is drinking low carb beer?

- The average age of a low carb beer drinker is 39 years old, slightly older than the Australian population average (36), and is more likely to be a woman.

- 29.5 per cent of respondents in this sample were men, 70.5 per cent were women.
- Compared to people who drink other types of beer, they tend to be more educated (35 per cent tertiary-educated) and are more likely to be employed.

Why do they drink it?

- More than two-thirds (71 per cent) said they believe low carb beer is *healthier than full-strength beer*, despite both types containing the same level of alcohol.
- More than a third (38 per cent) believe low carb beer is *healthier than light beer*.
- 44 per cent who drink low carb beer believe it is *less fattening*, despite no reliable evidence this is true.
- When asked which type of beer they would drink if they wanted to avoid weight gain, 87 per cent say they would choose low carb over mid-strength, full-strength or light beer.
- Four out of five of the main reasons given for drinking low carb related to health concerns (e.g. less bloating, less fattening, less kilojoules), rather than the enjoyment of the product (e.g. tastes better).

How much do they drink?

- 13 per cent of low carb beer drinkers *binge drink**, which is the same level as binge drinking across the broader Australian population.
- 15 per cent said they *consume more beer* than they usually would when drinking the low carb variety in the belief that it is healthier for them.
- Those who drink low carb beer at risky levels are more likely to drink it because they believe it's less fattening, less bloating and fashionable.

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* Binge drinking is defined as
7+ standard drinks for men and
5+ for women on any one day.

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Table 1
Is low carb beer healthier than other types of beer?

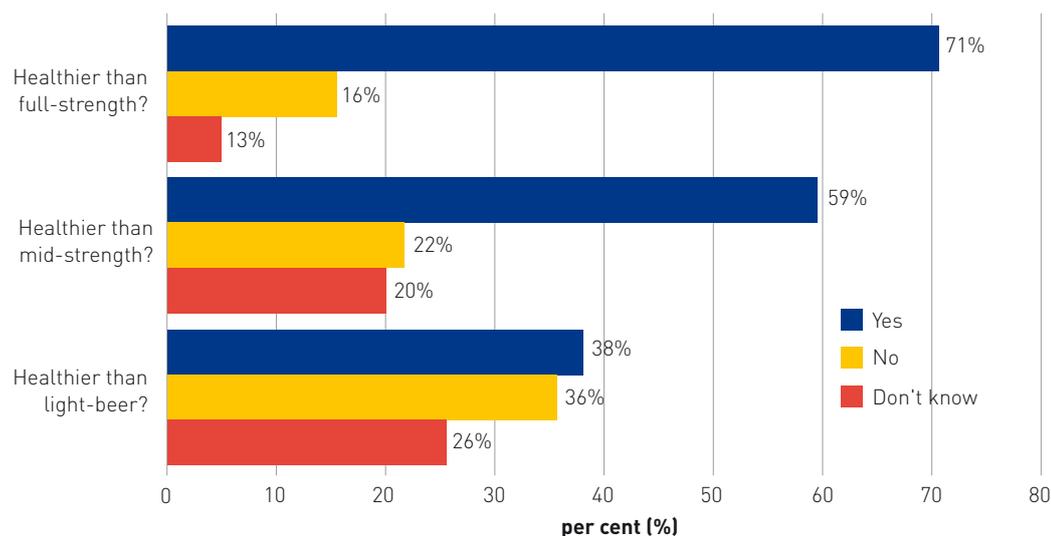
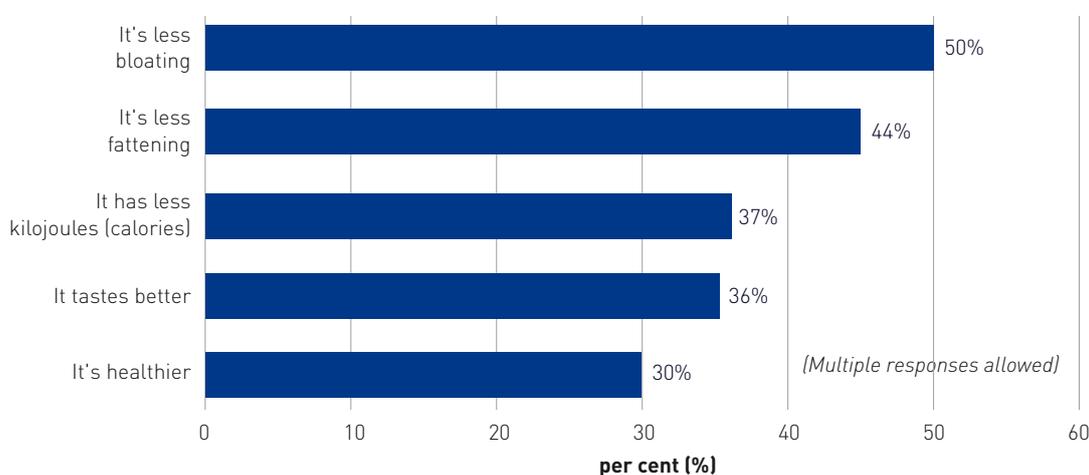


Table 2
Top five reasons for choosing low carb beer



Low carbohydrate beer and nutrition: the facts

There is little, if any, difference in the amount of alcohol and kilojoules contained in low carb and regular beers.¹

Alcohol contributes directly to energy intake – 1 gram of alcohol contributes 29.8 kilojoules of energy, compared with 15.4 kilojoules from 1 gram of sugar.²

The human body burns off the kilojoules contained in alcohol before it burns kilojoules from fat and carbohydrates, therefore, people who drink alcohol are liable to gain weight faster if this energy is not burned off.³

In addition to weight gain and obesity, alcohol is a known cause of cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, strokes and violent behaviour.⁴

A low carbohydrate beer may have 0.9 to 1.9 grams of carbohydrate per 100ml, while a regular beer may typically have 3.1 grams per 100 ml.⁵

In comparison, a regular soft drink can have anywhere up to 10 grams of carbohydrate per 100ml.⁶

1 Miller, P, Davoren, S, 2010. 'The growing popularity of "low-carb" beers: good marketing or community health risk?' *Medical Journal of Australia* Vol 192, no 4. P.235.

2 Ibid.

3 National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia), *Food for health. Dietary guidelines for Australian adults. A guide for healthy eating.* (2003)

4 Miller, P, Davoren, S, 2010. 'The growing popularity of "low-carb" beers: good marketing or community health risk?' *Medical Journal of Australia* Vol 192, no 4. P.235.

5 Ibid.

6 Saxelby, C, 'Beer – low carb or low-alcohol?' *Food Watch*, <http://foodwatch.com.au/hot-issues/beer-low-carb-or-low-alcohol.html> accessed at 18 September 2009.