

Evaluation of the impact of febfast participation

Summary report

Reducing harm from alcohol

VicHealth's strategy to reduce harm from alcohol

Reducing harm from alcohol is a strategic objective of VicHealth. To support this objective, the VicHealth Alcohol Strategy 2011-2014 has been developed to coordinate current and planned activities that VicHealth will lead and support.

The strategy has five main areas of focus:

Strategy Area	Objective
Policy and regulation	To advocate for and participate in the development of policy and regulatory options which reduce harm.
Cultural change	To facilitate and promote alcohol cultural change in key environments.
Influencing markets	Influence the alcohol and related markets to reduce market led activities that result in harm.
Supporting communities	Build capacity for communities to engage in alcohol cultural change strategies.
Building knowledge	Foster knowledge production and translation, and support evaluation on key alcohol policy issues.

VicHealth's interest in and support for the febfast program is an example of several of these strategic areas, including cultural change, supporting communities and building knowledge. While abstinence from alcohol as part of the febfast program is likely to provide health benefits for many people, VicHealth sees this as one part of a broader, multi-faceted approach to reducing harm from alcohol.

Background

What is febfast?

In recent years, VicHealth has observed a growing number of community-based initiatives that encourage people who regularly drink alcohol to temporarily reduce or abstain completely from drinking. Examples includes febfast, Ocsober, Dry July and Hello Sunday Morning. These initiatives are confronting and challenging for many people in the community, given the profoundly pro-drinking culture in Australia where four in five adults are regular drinkers.

febfast is an annual health and charity event that encourages people to forgo alcohol in February while raising money to support young people experiencing alcohol and other drug related problems.

febfast has two main functions: 1) to raise funds for programs assisting young people with drug and alcohol problems; and 2) to give participants a break from alcohol after the December/January festive season. febfast uses social media to attract participants and keep them informed, and celebrity endorsement to help publicise the event. Participants pay a \$25 registration fee and can sign up for the event as individuals or in teams. They may also purchase a Time Out Certificate for \$25 that allows them to drink alcohol on a nominated date.

What is known about the impact of this event?

The febfast organisation has undertaken participant evaluation surveys in previous years. These surveys have found that many individuals enjoy health benefits during the event and some altered their drinking patterns in subsequent months. Qualitative research of the experiences of young febfast participants found that many changed their attitudes towards alcohol and reduced consumption as a result of participation.¹ The current study aimed to build on this knowledge by surveying febfast 2011 participants, exploring their experiences of taking part, and understanding more about changes to attitudes and alcohol consumption patterns following the event.

Aim of evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were to understand:

- who took part in febfast and their reasons for participation
- the experience of participating in febfast
- the impact that taking part in febfast has on participants' alcohol awareness, health, and subsequent drinking behaviours
- awareness of febfast and barriers to participation among the Australian drinkers sample.

It is anticipated the results of this evaluation could be used to enhance the promotion and delivery of the program in future years, with the aim of increasing febfast participation rates.

Method

Two online surveys were conducted by VicHealth between June and July of 2011. The first was of febfast 2011 participants (n=1330) and the second was of Australian alcohol drinkers (n=2,015) using an online research panel provided by Research Now.

Analysis included statistical tests to detect associations between outcomes of interest and demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, household income), having completed febfast more than once, and drinking patterns.

febfast survey participants were more likely to be female and have participated in febfast more than once compared with all individuals registered for the 2011 febfast event. Proportions in each age group and state were similar. The Australian drinker sample had a similar distribution by age, sex and state of residence as the Australian population, but were more likely to consume alcohol at levels above the recommended guidelines than participants in a large national survey.²

Key findings

Comparison between febfast participants and Australian drinkers

Alcohol consumption patterns

- febfast attracts those with heavier alcohol consumption patterns. febfast participants were more likely to drink at levels associated with *long-term harm* in the previous three months (more than two standard drinks on any day), with nearly two thirds (62.6 per cent) drinking at this level at least once per week compared with only one third (33.6 per cent) of the Australian drinkers sample. febfast participants were also more likely to drink at levels putting them at risk of *short-term harm* (more than four standard drinks on any day) once a week or more often (31.8 vs. 17.2 per cent of the Alcohol drinker sample).

Characteristics of febfast participants

- Registration data show febfast 2011 participants were predominantly female, aged from their late 20s to their early 50s, and largely residing in Victoria. Most (84 per cent) participants were completing febfast for the first time.

- Survey data showed febfast participants were more likely to be working, have completed university and have a higher household income level compared to the Australian drinker sample.
- Four in five febfast participants personally knew someone else who participated in febfast, while less than one in ten of the Australian drinker sample reported the same.

Beliefs about alcohol (problems and benefits)

- The majority of both samples agreed that alcohol was a serious issue for the community. febfast participants were less likely to believe that there were benefits associated with drinking alcohol than the Australian drinker sample (49.2 vs. 54.7 per cent).
- Almost everyone in both samples believed there were health problems associated with drinking 'too much' alcohol.

Awareness of other alcohol abstaining fundraising programs

- Awareness of other alcohol fundraisers was high amongst febfast participants. More than half had heard of Dry July, and one quarter had heard of Ocsobor.
- One in six respondents in the Australian drinkers sample had heard of febfast.

Participating in febfast

Motivation to participate

- The most popular reasons to participate were related to personal benefits and health: 1) to give their body a break from alcohol; 2) the personal challenge of the event; and 3) to improve their health.
- Just over half were motivated to raise money for drug and alcohol services.
- One third took part to participate with friends, work colleagues, their partner, or someone else.

Experience of participating in febfast

- More than 85 per cent reported experiencing one or more benefits during febfast. The top three benefits reported were saving money, sleeping better, and losing weight.
- Nearly four in five agreed that it was easier to take a break from drinking by participating in febfast than abstaining from alcohol on their own. This may be indicative of the social stigma that some people feel when they choose not to drink alcohol.
- More than three quarters felt it was not difficult to give up alcohol for the month.
- Seven in ten agreed that they were now more aware of the effect alcohol has on their health.

febfast and social circle

- Not drinking alcoholic beverages during febfast is noticed and commented on by others:
 - Four in five reported others commented on the fact they were not drinking
 - Three quarters felt they needed to explain why they were not drinking
 - Two in five were offered drinks when others knew they were not drinking
- Two thirds of respondents had more conversations about alcohol during febfast than they would normally.

Fundraising

- Almost one third of respondents indicated they did not ask anyone for sponsorship (i.e. they only participated in the alcohol abstinence component of the febfast program, not the fund raising component).
- The most common reason given for not seeking sponsorship was related to their motivation to participate in febfast. In general, personal reasons were more important than fundraising.

Alcohol consumption patterns following febfast

Changes to frequency of alcohol consumption patterns following febfast

- Nearly two thirds of respondents agreed they now had more alcohol-free days every week since completing febfast.
- Just over half of respondents reported reducing how often they drank alcoholic beverages following febfast. Nine in ten of those who reduced their frequency intended to maintain the changes.
- Those planning to maintain their reduced frequency were primarily motivated by: 1) concerns about the impact of alcohol on their health; 2) the desire to feel better; and 3) having broken the habit.
- Reducing the frequency of consumption following febfast was positively associated with a higher household income, having lighter current drinking patterns, a higher frequency of consumption prior to febfast, experiencing benefits during febfast, and being motivated for reasons related to their personal drinking patterns or health.

Changes to amount of alcohol consumed following febfast

- Since completing febfast, 70 per cent of respondents agree they are more likely to think about how much they want to drink on any occasion.
- Just under half of respondents report drinking less on each occasion following febfast, and nearly all of those drinking less intend to maintain the changes.
- The benefits experienced during febfast meant that respondents were more likely to reduce the amount consumed on each occasion.

- The motivation to participate in febfast with others rather than as a sole participant was associated with a decreased likelihood of drinking less on each occasion following febfast.

Longevity of changes

- For many, changes to alcohol consumption following febfast appear to be sustained. More than a third of those reducing the frequency or amount of alcohol consumed after previous febfast events report that they maintained the change for at least one year.

Changes to smoking patterns following febfast

Changes to smoking

- One in five febfast participants reported smoking cigarettes or other tobacco products at least once in the last 12 months.
- Nearly half of smokers said they reduced the amount of tobacco products consumed during febfast.
- More than two thirds of the group reducing their tobacco consumption reported that they maintained the change after the event.

Future participation

Intentions to participate in future

- More than two thirds of febfast participants intended to participate the following year.
- Nearly all (92.7 per cent) said they would recommend febfast to their friends or family.
- Nearly one third of the Australian drinker sample indicated they were likely to participate in the future.

Barriers to participation amongst those who have never taken part

- Of the Australian drinkers sample, one in ten indicated they had considered taking part in febfast or a similar event.
- The top three barriers for those who had not taken part, but had considered it were: 1) not being sure how to get involved; 2) not getting around to registering; and 3) not believing that their drinking habits needed to change.
- The top three barriers for those who had not considered taking part were: 1) not being aware of the events; 2) not believing that their drinking habits needed to change; and 3) not being interested.

Discussion

This evaluation found that participating in febfast is a highly beneficial experience. The event appears to work for the following reasons: it gives people a legitimate reason not to drink alcohol in a way that is easily achievable (i.e. time limit, short month, unlimited Time Outs available for a fee) and without significant social stigma; and it allows them to personally experience the numerous benefits of drinking less for their health, wellbeing, and finances. Adherence is encouraged by public commitment through registration and seeking sponsorship.

The effects of participation are substantial. Aside from personally experiencing the benefits of lowering consumption, participation raises awareness about the short and long-term health effects of alcohol, and allows participants a chance to reflect on their own drinking behaviour, the consumption patterns in their social groups, and the role of alcohol in society. This awareness leads to more conversations around alcohol consumption with their social group, showing the potential to raise awareness more widely.

The combination of raised awareness and personal benefits experienced contributes to substantial changes in alcohol consumption and smoking following the event. In many cases these changes appear to be long-term.

The success of this event in raising awareness and reducing harmful consumption of alcohol is likely to be of interest to those working in alcohol and drug prevention. febfast attracts mainly well educated, professional women aged 25 to 55 who are more likely to drink at harmful levels. This cohort tends to be overlooked by alcohol awareness or harm-reduction campaigns that generally focus on young people and men.

Limitations

The study design was cross-sectional, and as such we are unable to state with absolute confidence that participants' alcohol consumption reduced as a result of febfast. This is because estimates of alcohol consumption patterns were self-reported, and relied on recall and therefore may be prone to bias. A quasi-experimental study design, featuring a comparison group and pre/post measurements of alcohol consumption, would reduce the potential for bias.

References

1. Kennedy, V. (2010). Young people's experience of FebFast. *Hope, hype or hard evidence? 17th Western Australian Drug and Alcohol Symposium*. Fremantle, Western Australia: 41.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report. *Drug statistics series no. 25. Cat. no. PHE 145*. Canberra, AIHW.

For more information

To download a copy of the full report go to www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Alcohol-Misuse

For more information about febfast contact Howard Ralley, National Director on 03 8412 8529 or go to www.febfast.org.au.

The website includes links to febfast event details and Twitter and Facebook feeds.