



# Northern Territories Alcohol Label Study: Baseline Report Executive Summary

Examining the impact of alcohol warning labels for increasing awareness of alcohol-related health risks and supporting more informed and safer alcohol consumption



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# Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research - University of Victoria

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## About the Research Study

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The primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of alcohol warning labels as a tool for increasing consumer awareness of alcohol-related health risks and supporting more informed and safer alcohol consumption. This research is led by researchers at Public Health Ontario and the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research of the University of Victoria and is being conducted in partnership with the Yukon Liquor Corporation.

This Executive Summary provides highlighted baseline results from the first of two surveys being conducted as part of the Northern Territories Alcohol Label Study. Results from these surveys provide baseline estimates of consumer knowledge of alcohol-related health risks and Canada's Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines, as well as estimates of their awareness, recall, and use of the current warning labels in Whitehorse and Yellowknife, before the intervention alcohol warning labels are implemented on containers in the liquor store in Whitehorse.

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for chronic disease and premature death among Canadians, and the top risk factor among those ages 15-49. Canada's Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines (LRDG), released in 2011, aim to help drinkers minimize alcohol-related harms. Yet Canadians remain largely unaware of the link between alcohol and health risks, and few have heard of the LRDG. Alcohol warning labels are one strategy to potentially increase awareness of alcohol-related health risks, and reduce intake by making the consequences of alcohol salient when purchasing and pouring alcohol.

The **primary objective** of the Health Canada-funded *Northern Territories Alcohol Study* is to conduct the first controlled pre-post quasi-experimental study to test, in the real-world, if rotating labels on alcohol containers with a cancer warning, Canada's LRDG, and standard drink information supports more informed and safer alcohol consumption. Partnering with the Yukon Liquor Corporation, the research goal is to test the impact of these labels on alcohol sold in the one government-owned liquor store in Whitehorse relative to alcohol sold in the two government-owned liquor stores in Yellowknife, without the intervention warning labels.

## **Study Design**

To test the impact of the warning labels, this study uses two key data sources: 1) surveys with a cohort of randomly selected liquor store patrons, and 2) liquor store transaction data. Using two data sources will allow us to triangulate our findings and have more confidence in the results. Results will provide real-world evidence to inform regulatory efforts in Yukon and other jurisdictions in Canada that are considering alcohol warning label policies.

This research will be the first controlled pre-post study to test the impact of warning labels with a health message, national alcohol drinking guidelines, and standard drink information on alcohol containers in liquor stores. Recent research examining alcohol warning labels suggests explicit and personally relevant label messages that provide new information, particularly information linking alcohol and cancer risk, are critical for increasing the salience of labels and potential impact on drinking behaviours. This is a unique opportunity to conduct a quasi-experiment with high internal and external validity. It is being conducted in partnership with the Yukon Liquor Corporation (YLC), responsible for the purchase, distribution, and sale of alcohol in Yukon. Under this collaboration, the YLC will post the intervention labels on alcohol containers in the Whitehorse liquor store for an 8-month period as well as launch a social marketing campaign that aligns with the timing and messaging of the labels.

## **Jurisdiction**

Whitehorse is an ideal jurisdiction to test alcohol warning labels because Yukon has a diverse population with a relatively higher prevalence of per capita alcohol consumption than the rest of Canada. Moreover, the processes required to post alcohol warning labels on alcohol containers sold in liquor stores has already been established in Yukon. The Yukon and Northwest Territories (NWT) are currently the only jurisdictions in Canada to require an alcohol warning label affixed to all alcohol sold to the public. The labels provide a warning regarding alcohol and pregnancy, with an additional label message in NWT cautioning consumers about alcohol and the operation of motor vehicles (Figure 1). Since their implementation in 1991 in Yukon and NWT, no evaluation of the labels has been conducted.

**Figure 1. Current Warning Labels on Alcohol Containers in Yukon and Northwest Territories**



**a. Yukon**  
(actual size = 3.5cm x 2.2cm)



**b. Northwest Territories**  
(actual size = 5.1cm x 3.2cm)

## Methods - Baseline

Baseline surveys were conducted by trained Research Assistants (RAs) with 507 customers in the single liquor store in Whitehorse and with 333 customers in the two liquor stores in Yellowknife over 6-weeks in May to June 2017. Eligible participants included current drinkers age 19+, who are residents of Whitehorse or Yellowknife, have not previously participated in the survey, have purchased alcohol at the liquor store on the day of recruitment, and did not report being pregnant or breastfeeding. Identical surveys and protocols were used in Whitehorse and Yellowknife to allow for strong comparisons between jurisdictions.

## Baseline Results

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### Noticing Current Warning Labels and Label Saliency

Results suggest more than 80% of participants in both Whitehorse and Yellowknife noticed the current warning labels (Figure 1) on alcohol containers in the past six months, but that label saliency is low. Among those participants who noticed the current labels, over 65% of the participants in both jurisdictions were able to recall label messages related to alcohol and FASD or pregnancy. About 10% of participants who noticed the labels in Whitehorse and Yellowknife reported reading the labels, and 5% or less reported thinking about the labels, or talking about the label messages with others “often” or “very often”.

### Influence of Current Warning Labels on Alcohol-Related Behaviours

Results from the surveys suggest that the current warning labels had “some influence” on the type of alcohol purchased or amount of alcohol consumed in the past 6 months among less than 25% of participants in Whitehorse and Yellowknife. Although low levels were detected in both jurisdictions, a significantly higher proportion of participants in Yellowknife (16.7%) than

Whitehorse (7.4%) self-reported drinking less alcohol as a result of the current warning labels. Given that individuals tend to underestimate their alcohol consumption in surveys, going forward, we will triangulate the self-reported survey data with the liquor store sales data to confirm the extent to which alcohol purchasing/consumption behaviours change over time.

### **Knowledge of Alcohol-Related Health Risks and Support for Labels with Health Messages**

When asked about the link between alcohol and health conditions, results of the surveys indicate that more than 96% of participants in both Whitehorse and Yellowknife understand that alcohol can cause liver disease and harm to a fetus, but only about one quarter know the link between alcohol and breast cancer. The majority of participants in both Whitehorse and Yellowknife either agreed or strongly agreed that alcohol containers should be labelled with health warnings describing the link between alcohol and diseases, such as cancer. There were no significant differences in knowledge of alcohol-related health conditions between jurisdictions.

### **Knowledge of the Number of Standard Drinks per Container and Support for Standard Drink Labels**

Overall, with the exception of wine, results indicate that more than 50% of participants had difficulty identifying the number of standard drinks in containers of alcohol. About half of participants in both jurisdictions at least agreed that alcohol containers should be labelled with the number of standard drinks per container, and that these labels would help them or someone else stay within Canada's LRDG. There were significant differences in ability to estimate standard drinks in spirits and beer containers between jurisdictions, but no significant differences in either ability to estimate standard drinks in wine or cider containers or support for standard drink labelling.

### **Awareness and Knowledge of Canada's Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines and Support for Labels**

About one-third of participants in both Whitehorse and Yellowknife were aware of Canada's LRDG before participating in this study. In total, 1 in 10 males in both jurisdictions, and 1 in 4 females in Whitehorse and 1 in 6 females in Yellowknife were able to correctly report the number of standard drinks in a day recommended for their sex assigned at birth. Generally, there is support in both Whitehorse and Yellowknife for labelling alcohol beverages with

Canada's LRDG, and the majority of participants believe these labels will make them think about the number of drinks they consume.

## Conclusion

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The results of the baseline surveys indicate that the majority of participants in Whitehorse and Yellowknife noticed the current warning label on alcohol containers, yet label saliency was very low. Given that the current warning labels were first implemented in 1991 in Yukon and NWT, the low proportion of participants reading, thinking about, or talking about label messages may in part be due to “wear-out” or “overexposure”. One solution to the wear-out effect is to create new warning labels. Most participants know the health risks related to alcohol and FASD and liver disease, but only about 25% understand that alcohol can cause cancer. Generally, there is support for alcohol warning labels with a health message, Canada's LRDG, and standard drink information. Similar results were found among participants in Whitehorse and Yellowknife before the intervention alcohol warning labels are implemented on containers in the liquor store in Whitehorse, suggesting that Yellowknife is an appropriate control condition for testing alcohol warning labels in Whitehorse.

To request a copy of the full Baseline Report please contact: Erin Hobin, [Erin.Hobin@oahpp.ca](mailto:Erin.Hobin@oahpp.ca)