



# Club Soda survey on labelling of “alcohol free” drinks

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## Executive Summary

Club Soda conducted an online survey to gauge people's views on what they consider “alcohol free” when it comes to drinks, and whether providing them with factual information will change their views. The main conclusion is that education can and will change people's views. In the survey, people were presented a series of statements about alcohol in food and drinks, and the impact of drinking 0.5% ABV drinks. The percentage of respondents who would allow 0.5% ABV drinks to be labelled “alcohol free” went up from 49% before they were presented with the information, to 67% after.

## Introduction

This survey was conducted between 30 April and 9 May 2018. The recruitment was via the Club Soda email list and social media channels (Facebook and Twitter). The number of responses was 511.

## Starting point - what do people think at the moment?

**Q1: How much alcohol (ABV) do you think a drink labelled “non-alcoholic” or “alcohol-free” should be allowed to contain (for example beer, cider, or wine)**

Response	%age of responses	Cumulative %age
0% (none at all)	28%	100%
0.05% or less	23%	72%
0.5% or less	45%	49%
1% or less	4%	4%
5% or less	0%	0%

### Club Soda

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The first question asked about the respondents current view on labelling: what ABV are they willing to consider "alcohol free"? Over a quarter opted for absolute zero: 0%. Just under a quarter would allow 0.05% and nearly half would be happy with 0.5%. Counting the cumulative percentages, 72% would allow a 0.05% drink to be labelled alcohol free, and 49% would allow a 0.5% one.

## Q2: How would you describe your drinking habits?

Response	%age of responses
I used to drink but not any more	46%
I'm trying to quit	17%
I'm a mindful/moderate drinker	20%
I'm trying to cut down	11%
I drink quite a lot	9%
I have never drank much alcohol	1%
Other	2%

This question about drinking habits was asked to understand the survey population better (the responses don't add up to 100% as people were allowed to choose more than one option). Since the recruitment was largely among existing Club Soda members, it is no surprise that the majority are former drinkers or trying to quit or cut down. This survey is therefore not representative of the general population.

## How people react to facts about low/no alcohol drinks?

### Q3: Many foods contain small amounts of alcohol - fresh fruit, bread, cakes, pastries, vinegar, soy sauce, yoghurt can contain up to 0.5% alcohol

(The source for this information is: Logan and Distefano, Ethanol Content of Various Foods and Soft Drinks and their Potential for Interference with a Breath-Alcohol Test, Journal of Analytical Toxicology, Volume 22, Issue May/June, 1998, available at <https://academic.oup.com/jat/article-pdf/22/3/181/2363223/22-3-181.pdf>.)

Response	%age of responses
I knew this already	45%
I'm a little surprised by this	37%
I find this hard to believe	16%

I don't believe this	1%
Other	1%

This statement was not surprising to most respondents: 45% said they already knew about alcohol in foodstuffs, and only 1% refused to believe the fact. But 16% still said they found it hard to believe.

**Q4: Almost all drinks contain traces of alcohol (or even up to 0.5%), for example soft drinks, fruit juices, ginger beer, kombucha etc**

(The source for this information is: Nisperos-Carriedo and Shaw, Comparison of volatile flavor components in fresh and processed orange juices, Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry, Volume 38, Issue 4, 1990, available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/jf00094a029>.)

Response	%age of responses
I knew this already	37%
I'm a little surprised by this	49%
I find this hard to believe	8%
I don't believe this	5%
Other	1%

The presence of alcohol in "non-alcoholic" drinks was somewhat more surprising to respondents: almost half were at least a little surprised, and a further 13% were very sceptical.

**Q5: A German study showed that drinking three bottles of 0.5% beer did not show up in a blood test, and driving after drinking them is considered safe in Germany.**

(The source for this information is: Thierauf, Große Perdekamp and Auwärter, Maximale Blutalkoholkonzentration nach forciertem Konsum von alkoholfreiem Bier, Rechtsmedizin, Volume 22, Issue 4, 2012, available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs00194-012-0835-8#page-1>.)

Response	%age of responses
I knew this already	43%
I'm a little surprised by this	42%
I find this hard to believe	4%

I don't believe this	2%
Other	9%

The vast majority of respondents were not much surprised by the fact that drinking 0.5% drinks don't stop you from driving. Only 6% said they found it hard to believe or would not believe it at all.

**Q6: Also based on German research, drinking small amounts of 0.5% beer or wine is considered safe for pregnant women**

(The source for this information is: FAQ pages on pregnancy and childbirth, Charite University Hospital Berlin, available at:

[https://geburtsmedizin.charite.de/fuer\\_schwangere/faq\\_zu\\_schwangerschaft\\_und\\_geburt/.](https://geburtsmedizin.charite.de/fuer_schwangere/faq_zu_schwangerschaft_und_geburt/))

Response	%age of responses
I knew this already	43%
I'm a little surprised by this	39%
I find this hard to believe	5%
I don't believe this	4%
Other	9%

Reaction to the safety of 0.5% drinks to pregnant women was similarly not too surprising to most respondents.

**Q7: Most countries around the world allow 0.5% drinks to be labelled alcohol-free - and sometimes this limit is even higher**

(The source for this information is: Club Soda research.)

Response	%age of responses
I knew this already	49%
I'm a little surprised by this	41%
I find this hard to believe	5%
I don't believe this	0%
Other	4%

As with the previous two questions, learning that 0.5% is the most common global standard for "alcohol free" status was not a major surprise to most people, and hardly anyone said they would not believe this fact.

In all five of these questions (Q3 to Q7), the respondents were less surprised and resistant to believe the facts, the higher their response was to the first question (what ABV would allow to be labelled "alcohol free").

For example in Q7, "I find this hard to believe" was the response by 13% of those would allow absolutely no alcohol in "alcohol free", 3% of those who would allow 0.05%, and only 1% of those who would allow 0.5%. And conversely, "I knew this already" was the response by 66% ("0.5%"), 42% ("0.05%") and 26% ("0%").

## Do facts change views about labelling?

After the respondents had been presented with the statements above, we returned to the main question of the survey. In the following two questions we again asked what ABV drinks they would allow to be labelled as "alcohol free"? We asked about two limits: 0.05% and 0.5%.

**Q8: Now that you know what we know, would you allow 0.05% ABV drinks to be labelled "alcohol-free"?**

Response	%age of responses
Yes	83%
No	17%

With the small bit of "education" in this survey, the percentage of respondents who would allow 0.05% ABV drinks to be labelled "alcohol free" has gone up from 72% before the statements to 83% after.

**Q9: Would you allow 0.5% ABV drinks to be labelled "alcohol-free"?**

Response	%age of responses
Yes	67%
No	33%

As in the previous question, the percentage of respondents who would allow 0.5% ABV drinks to be labelled "alcohol free" went up; from 49% before the statements to 67% after.

Looking at the responses to questions Q1, Q8 and Q9, we can get a picture of how people changed their views. It seems that some respondents may have misunderstood the questions as they gave logically inconsistent answers.

Of the 142 respondents who at the start of the survey insisted on no alcohol at all in "alcohol free" drinks, 52% would at the end accept 0.05%, and 34% would even allow 0.5% as the limit.

Of the 116 who were happy with 0.05% at the start, 91% would still allow 0.05%<sup>1</sup>, and 51% would now allow 0.5% as well.

Even if these numbers are not completely reliable, they still provide a strong indication that people are willing to change their views on this topic, when they are offered relevant information. Though as the additional comments listed in the Appendix demonstrate, much confusion and uncertainty still remains in many people's minds.

## Conclusions

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from the results of this survey.

1. There is a large number of people with unrealistic expectations about what "alcohol free" or "non-alcoholic" means in reality. In our survey, 28% of the respondents initially said they would accept no alcohol at all in drinks labelled as such (which would be physically impossible for most common drinks sold to consumers).
2. A large number of people are not aware of the facts on the alcohol content of many foods and drinks, and what the impact is of drinking low alcohol drinks (at 0.5% ABV).
3. Education can and will change people's views - even in this simple survey, several people changed their mind on the labelling of low/no alcohol drinks after being presented with some of the relevant information.

The first conclusion was already confirmed in an earlier Club Soda survey conducted with Alcohol Concern/Alcohol Research UK, where 47%, an even higher number, would allow no alcohol at all in "alcohol free" drinks (see the full results of the earlier survey at: <https://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/blog/alcohol-free-drinks-lets-get-things-clear>).

The second conclusion matches our anecdotal evidence. And in fact we've been surprised by some of the information ourselves, for example the fact that yoghurt contains small amounts of ethanol as it is produced through lactic fermentation.

This raises the need for more public education, on for example all the foods and drinks that do contain small amounts of ethanol. Even when they are told about it, some still consider it "criminal" that there is no mention of alcohol content on the labels (see the

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<sup>1</sup> This is where some confusion with the questions may show up, unless some people really became less tolerant of small amounts of alcohol in "alcohol free" during the survey.

Appendix). And one respondent made a comparison to "may contain traces of nuts" labels - suggesting that the same practice should apply to alcohol.

The third conclusion is the key positive finding from this survey. Despite many people lacking information initially, they are willing to be persuaded by credible sources and to reconsider their views on what "alcohol free" means.

## Appendix

The following are some of the responses to the final question in the survey ("Any other thoughts or comments on this topic or this survey?"). The responses are given verbatim, in full.

### **Pro a 0.5% "alcohol free" limit**

*Personally, I'm happy to chose drinks 0.5% alcohol and below - I agree with the premise of this survey however that uk labelling is confusing and support the work you're doing in this area, thank you!*

*Knew this already. 0.5% is a much more sensible threshold than 0.05% because 0.05% makes many things alcoholic that virtually everyone accepts as not being alcoholic.*

*I think the German drink driving study is a useful indicator for confirming that 0.5% can be considered alcohol free*

*0.5% alcohol is very low and assurance needs to be given that these levels are completely safe.*

*Bacteria in human guts also produce ethanol. Really, anything below about 2-3% alcohol is so negligible it is not worth making such a fuss about.*

### **"No means no"**

*Many people don't want to drink alcohol, and others can't for health or religious reasons. It would help the British public if 0% meant 0%! Then you wouldn't worry if you were hosting someone who didn't drink alcohol - you knew you could get an alternative and are safe, without having to scour the labels for more info.*

*I think this isn't an issue of logic but one of emotion. Although 0.5% may be effectively alcohol free, or have no effect, I wouldn't want to give it to my alcoholic friends or people in early recovery. Any non-0.0x% on the bottle feels too high on an emotional level.*

*I think that if you put alcohol into any food drinks and it doesn't state so it criminal.*

### **Not sure**

*It's so confusing!*

*I'm still struggling with the idea of 0.5% as "non-alcoholic", for some reason... even though I know that non-UK beverages of 0.5% can be labelled in this way AND all the things above about the naturally occurring alcohol percentages in other foods. That's a perception issue, maybe.*

*It may be better to label these drinks "May contain traces of alcohol"*

*This is a hard one, because alcohol free should mean exactly that - but then we don't expect to find it in orange juice. I only recently discovered that this can be as much as 0.5%, so I guess labelling beers in this way is fairly innocent - it is just that when people are looking, actually looking to buy a beer that has no alcohol in it, that is a different matter, isn't it?*

*My head is muddled with this. I am not sure of my feelings about this.*

### **Related points**

*It would be great to have clearer guidelines for consumers on the difference between non-alcoholic, alcohol free and low alcohol etc.*

*I hope labelling can be made clear and unambiguous*

*In my view there is no harm in traces of alcohol and I would not want to nit pick about that when the bigger picture to me is about being mindful of alcohol with the potential to be damaging*

*Make the alcohol level more obvious on the labels*

*Consumers still need to read labels*

*Labelling is still confusing for many foods and drinks. It would be great for there to be more educational support. Could contribute to more understanding around health choices in our country.*

*Why can't they just be labelled with the amount of alcohol and let people decide whether to drink it or not.*

*Labelling has to sit alongside education or the percentage won't mean anything to people*

*I think that as long as a bottle tells you that it has 0.5 percent it is up to the individual to make their choice*