

Alcohol-free and low-strength drinks: Understanding their role in reducing alcohol-related harms

TWO MINUTE SUMMARY

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SMF

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This report examines the market for alcohol-free and low-strength products – “NoLo drinks” – in the UK. It explores recent trends in the market; consumer demographics and habits; the regulation and marketing of NoLo products; and the potential impact on health outcomes.

Alcohol harm is significant – a review of studies in high-income countries showed the gross economic costs of alcohol to range from 1.4% to 2.7% of GDP, equivalent to between £27 billion and £52 billion in the UK in 2016. ONS data show that there were 7,551 deaths related to alcohol-specific causes in the UK in 2018.

In response to these harms, the UK Government has expressed an interest in exploring the role that NoLo products can play in improving public health outcomes, as set out in the 2019 Prevention Green Paper. With existing research on the health impacts of NoLo drinks limited, this research intends to shed more light on how these products might impact the level of alcohol-related harms in the UK.

1 – The market for NoLo drinks

The market for NoLo drinks in the UK is seeing significant growth. 2019 data from CGA showed sales of alcohol-free and low-strength drinks in the on-trade growing by 48% in the preceding 12 months.

However, this growth – widely covered in the media – must be put into context. NoLo drinks account for a very low share of the alcoholic drinks market (including alcohol-free variants of beers, ciders, wines and spirits). In 2018/19, we estimate that the market share of NoLo drinks, by sales value, stood at 0.2%. Annual sales growth of NoLo drinks would

have to exceed over 40% per annum for the NoLo market share to stand above 10% by 2030.

The relatively small size of the NoLo drinks market thus needs to be taken into account when assessing the current health benefits at a population level. However, at an individual level, the use of NoLo drinks could generate significant health improvements if it leads to reduced levels of alcohol consumption.

2 – The consumption of NoLo drinks

Findings from an Opinion survey, commissioned as part of this study, reveal a complex picture of the level of consumption of NoLo products and the public’s attitude towards them. Key findings indicate that:

- 1 in 5 individuals (21%) had consumed an alcohol-free drink in the last 12 months, whilst 17% had consumed a low-alcohol drink in the same period.
- Those aged 18-34 are more likely to have consumed a NoLo drink than those aged 35-54 and 55+, as are those in higher income socioeconomic groups.
- Drinking at times when it would not have been more appropriate to have something stronger – e.g. when driving later on – was the most common reason (39%) for consuming a NoLo drink.

3 – The regulation of NoLo drinks

Many aspects of drinks marketing and labelling are self-regulated by industry, including with NoLo drinks, and descriptors and labelling for NoLo drinks are governed by guidelines, not legislation.

Current descriptors guidance issued by DHSC contains elements of ambiguity and it is not clear how they can be enforced by Trading Standards. For example, well-known

producers market some beers containing 0.5% ABV as “alcohol-free” rather than as “dealcoholised”, as suggested in the DHSC guidance. The UK also has relatively narrow definitions of ‘low-strength’ and ‘alcohol-free’ compared with other countries. In several European countries, such as Germany and Belgium, “alcohol-free” relates to drinks of up to 0.5% ABV, rather than the 0.05% ABV seen in UK Government guidelines. Some European countries also place restrictions on the marketing of NoLo products which appear similar to higher strength products, in order to reduce potential alibi marketing.

4 – The presentation of NoLo drinks

Analysis of how NoLo products are covered in media outputs revealed a primary narrative centred on changing consumption habits and a “new sensibility”, particularly among younger people. NoLo is seen as a “trend” or “movement”, rooted in a drive for healthy lifestyles and a new kind of “experience” which does not necessarily involve alcohol.

There appear to be two key growth strategies adopted by NoLo manufacturers. One is focused on making NoLo a mainstay of the drinks sector through creating a “community” of drinkers of such products. The other aims to encourage people to consume NoLo drinks at times and on occasions when alcohol would not normally be consumed, such as when driving.

5 – The impact of NoLo on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms

Among those that have consumed a NoLo product recently – within the last 12 months 41% reporting cutting back or giving up completely, against 44% saying their alcohol consumption was unchanged.

About a third (32%) of those that had consumed a NoLo drink in the last 12 months agreed that they had been using these products on top of, rather than instead of, existing levels of alcohol consumption. Just under two fifths (39%) disagreed with this statement. Therefore, while a significant proportion of consumers report that NoLo drinks have led to them cutting back on alcohol consumption, policymakers should be mindful of a significant demographic of users

that are consuming these products as complements to, rather than substitutes for, stronger products.

Similarly, moderate and heavy drinkers appear more likely than non-drinkers and light drinkers to consume NoLo drinks on specific occasions (such as when driving), and on top of (rather than instead of) consumption of stronger drinks. This might limit the potential health benefits that could be realised from increased use of NoLo products.

6 – Considerations for policymakers

NoLo descriptors and labelling require reform

- There is a widespread lack of awareness of what government-recommended descriptors such as “alcohol-free” and “low-strength” mean.
- Reducing the number of descriptors, increasing consumer awareness of these and making them mandatory could greatly improve clarity around the alcohol-content of NoLo drinks, and their potential health implications.
- There is a compelling case for ensuring that any health risks of NoLo drinks are clearly labelled to protect specific individuals – such as those who are pregnant or have a liver condition.

NoLo drinks should be seen one tool, among others, for reducing alcohol-related harms

- Whilst some individuals could see health improvements through the use of NoLo drinks, in isolation it seems unlikely that these products can drive significant reductions in aggregate alcohol-related harms. This is due to low market share and irregular usage by a large proportion of NoLo drinkers.
- Therefore it is unclear why the Government’s Prevention Green Paper has homed in on NoLo drinks as a way of reducing alcohol-related harms.
- It is crucial, therefore, that the prevention agenda within government is broadened out to consider other policy options including availability of NoLo products, duty reform, and minimum unit pricing.

The full report can be found [here](#). This research was kindly sponsored by Alcohol Change UK.