

Coming Down on Alcoholic “Soft Drinks”

“Girlie” Drinks Lead to Grown-Up Problems

Studies have shown that teenage girls are more likely than teenage boys to drink alcopops. These statistics are from a 2004 study by the American Medical Association, available at www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/14425.html.

- Nearly one in six teen girls who have drunk alcopops in the past six months have been sexually active after drinking.
- One out of four teen girls who have tried alcopops have driven after drinking or ridden in a car with a driver who had been drinking.
- One out of five teen girls who have tried alcopops have thrown up or passed out from drinking.



By Christine Netznik

Illinois advocates are taking on the alcohol industry over the issue of alcopops – alcoholic “soft drinks” that they say are frequently marketed to teens.

Alcopops are a combination of malt liquor and hard liquor with sweet, fruity flavors. Sold under names such as Smirnoff Ice, Mike’s Hard Lemonade and Bacardi Silver, these drinks are meant to appeal to people who don’t drink beer. As Anheiser-Busch’s Director of New Products told *Advertising Age* magazine, “The beauty of this category is that it brings in new drinkers, people who really don’t like the taste of beer.”

Not surprisingly, the “new drinkers . . . who really don’t like the taste of beer” include lots of teenagers. The 2005 Monitoring the Future study found that 74 percent of high school seniors had tried alcopops, and 31 percent of high school seniors had drunk alcopops in the last 30 days.

In the view of prevention advocates, liquor industry marketing is contributing to the consumption of alcopops by teens and to the underage drinking crisis. Alcopops are frequently packaged in bright, hip, youthful graphics that – according to studies by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) – appeal to teens. Alcopops are available in almost all convenience stores, and CPSI found that 24 percent of teens ages 14 to 18 were able to buy alcopops at convenience stores. Further, almost all teens, 84 percent, said that alcopops are “easy” to get.

Advocates are further upset by the prevalence of alcopops advertising. A 2003 study by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth found that on a per capita basis, young people had been exposed to 92 percent more printed alcopop advertising than adults had. Although the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms ruled in 1996 that alcopops should be classified as distilled spirits, the ruling has not been enforced. As a result, alcopops have been marketed under the less-stringent rules that apply to beer and wine.

Led by the Illinois Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Association (IADDA), prevention and treatment professionals are calling on the Illinois legislature to ban the marketing of alcopops to underage youth. IADDA is an organization that works on policy issues on behalf of more than 50 prevention and treatment providers across the state.

Teens ages 12 to 20 comprise about 15 percent of the American population. The alcohol industry’s own standards call for a ban on advertising on television shows and in magazines where 30 percent or more of the audience is under age 21. However, that 30 percent standard is double the representation of teens in the population, which means that teens are disproportionately exposed to alcohol advertising. IADDA is calling for a legislative ban on alcopops advertising in all markets with a youth audience, and for closer regulation to ensure that advertisers adhere to the ban.

Additionally, IADDA and its members are calling for a ban on selling alcopops in convenience stores. Currently, alcopops are available in most of Illinois’ 4,378 neighborhood convenience stores. IADDA wants them restricted to liquor stores and similar outlets to reduce youth access.

The IADDA campaign kicked off with a press conference in Chicago in late January. State Sen. Carol Ronen (D-Chicago) announced that she will sponsor legislation to ban the marketing of alcopops to teens. To stay up-to-date on this issue, visit the IADDA Web site at www.iadda.org.

Netznik is the Communications Manager for Prevention First.

Hard

