Alcohol and Young People: What do young people drink?

Surveys of 12-17 year old Australian school students report that the most common types of alcohol consumed by teenagers are spirits (35%), pre-mixed spirits or RTDs (29%) and beer (21%).

Beer is the most common drink for teenage boys (33%) and RTDs for teenage girls (47%).

Ready-to-drink (RTD) Products

While there is a wide range of alcohol beverage types available in Australia, RTDs (also known as ‘alcopops’) have been the subject of considerable concern in relation to their contribution to alcohol consumption among young people.

RTDs are beverages made with a spirit or wine base and a non-alcoholic mixer such as juice or soft drink, served in a pre-mixed package, and were first introduced in Australia in the mid 1990s.

Currently in Australia the ready-to-drink (RTD) market accounts for 20% of all retail liquor sales.

The 2005 Australian secondary school students alcohol survey, found that 25% of 12-15 year olds and 34% of 16-17 year olds identified RTDs as their usual drink; and girls were far more likely to report drinking RTDs (42% of 12-15 year old girls and 53% of 16-17 year old girls).

Young people report preferring to drink RTDs because they taste nice (don’t taste like alcohol), are easy to get, and are what their friends drink.

Alcohol energy drinks combine alcohol, soft drinks, and ingredients such as caffeine and guarana.

These products are particularly concerning as the combination of a stimulant (energy drink) and a depressant (alcohol) can mask the effects of alcohol resulting in increased consumption and lack of awareness of the amount of alcohol consumed.

Studies of the effects of alcohol energy drinks have found that they reduce perceptions of alcohol intoxication but do not alter the actual effects of alcohol on concentration and performance.

This means that young people who consume alcohol-energy drinks may, for example, incorrectly believe that they are capable of driving or engaging in other risky activities.

In the UK, concerns have also been raised about the potential for the consumption of alcohol-energy drinks to lead to uncharacteristic aggressive behaviours.

Key Points
- 34% of 16-17 year old Australians identify Ready-to-Drink (RTD) alcohol products as their usual choice
- Higher consumption is noted in girls, with 53% reporting RTDs as their drink of choice
- Teenagers like RTDs better than other types of alcohol because of their sweet taste, availability and because they are fashionable
- Teens who consume alcohol energy drinks may be more likely to engage in risky activities such as drink-driving and aggressive behaviours

What Can I Do?
- Lobby for stricter regulation on the sale and promotion of alcohol, particularly RTD products
- Support legislation that calls for higher taxes on RTD products
- Talk to your children about the risks associated with drinking alcohol energy drinks

Other Fact Sheets in this Series
- ALC1: Alcohol & Young People: Is Teenage Drinking Really A Problem?
- ALC3: Alcohol & Young People: Further Reading

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