

Alcopops: Easy to Drink and Difficult to Avoid

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Alcopop sales on the rise:

The US has seen unrelenting growth in alcohol consumption and sales over the past decade. *This is partially fueled by new beverage types like alcopops and ready-to-drink (RTD) cocktails, defined as flavored alcohol beverages that are sweet or carbonated giving the taste and experience of drinking a soda, seltzer water, fruit juice, lemonade, or tea.* This alcohol beverage type is often consumed by minors because they are marketed through social media and other ad campaigns, contain enticing flavors, and stand out with colorful packaging. Alcopops, despite their often-sweet taste, are often sold in single-use cans that contain multiple servings, in effect a binge drink in a can. This is dangerous for any consumer, but particularly for youth, who are more prone to injury after drinking alcohol and binge drinking.

How are alcopops made and how much alcohol do they really contain?

One reason for the explosion in alcopop consumption is how these beverages mask the flavor of alcohol with appealing tastes like soda, lemonade, tea, and other fruit flavors. Some alcopops are flavored malt beverages produced from a clarified fermented malt beverage base and others (also known as ready to drink, RTD, or R2D cocktails) are made with a sugar or liquor base. Brewers can easily add various flavors, typically containing distilled spirits, to achieve the desired taste profile and alcohol level. While the alcohol content of alcopops is like that of most traditional malt beverages, alcohol content in many of them is derived primarily from the distilled spirits component of added flavors rather than from fermentation (1). The range in alcohol content and serving sizes alcopops can cause overconsumption.

24-ounce (tall boy) alcopops are often a binge drink in a can.

The Alcohol by Volume (ABV) of an alcopop typically ranges from 5-14% alcohol and it is common for single cans to be sold as large as 24 ounces (Tall Boys) and contain up to five standard servings of alcohol per can. Drinking a whole 24 ounce can of 12% ABV alcohol beverage (whether an alcopop, high alcohol beer, or wine) is enough to bring a person's Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) to 0.08 or higher—making it a binge drink in a can. Recent data indicates two-thirds of underage drinkers consumed alcopops in the last month and "ready to drink" alcoholic beverages now account for 11% of the total alcohol market (2). Data from 2015-2019 show a 32% increase in alcopop sales. (3). Consumption of alcopops by minors who often do not understand alcohol serving information and underestimate their own level of intoxication contributes to acute alcohol induced injury and can also result in long term impacts to the brain or future development of an alcohol use disorder.

Accessibility of Alcopops:

Inexpensive pricing and easy access contribute to the appeal and consumption of alcopops by youth. In Wisconsin, since ‘fermented malt beverages’ (FMB) are regulated separately from liquor, alcopops made with a fermented malt beverage base can be sold as beer and at the lower rate of taxation. Due to this classification, existing beer/wine distribution networks can also be used for the alcopop supply chain, drastically increasing store availability (4). Because these products are colorful, cheap, and accessible, they attract youth. Casual observers can see that alcopops and ready-to-drink cocktails are often cheaper than soda and, in some cases, even water.

Targeted industry marketing and ad campaigns increase consumption in youth and vulnerable communities:



Figure 1. Enticing colors and flavors in Mike's Hard Lemonade, images captured by Benjamin O'Brien

Predatory marketing practices and targeted ad campaigns by large alcohol conglomerates as well as product placement, packaging that like energy drinks (Fig 1.) and pricing at local liquor stores and bodegas

contribute to youth acceptability of alcopop sales. The goal of marketing is not only to expose the user to the product, but to

engage the user, mostly youth, to incorporate alcopops in their lives. On average, youth are exposed to a minimum of three alcohol ads daily. This number is even higher in populations who in the past were less likely to consume alcohol but have been shown to be more likely to consume these products after consistent ad exposure (5-6). Non-white communities are especially vulnerable to this predatory marketing as they are more likely to live where stores place alcopops and RTDs in front of the store in a cooler. Additionally, these cheap products are often next to energy drinks and are inexpensive, making it the easy choice for consumers. Continuous exposure to alcohol ads further normalizes the presence and consumption of alcohol among minors and vulnerable communities. After ad exposure, youth often perceive drinking positively or assume it is common amongst their peers even if that is not the case (7). In addition to high ad exposure, the use of youth-appealing words, colors, cartoons, and images is a widely adopted marketing strategy across the country and soda companies are now selling items like Hard Mountain Dew. (Figure 2 and 3). For example, three-fourths of televised alcopop ad content uses themes like party, love, and cool

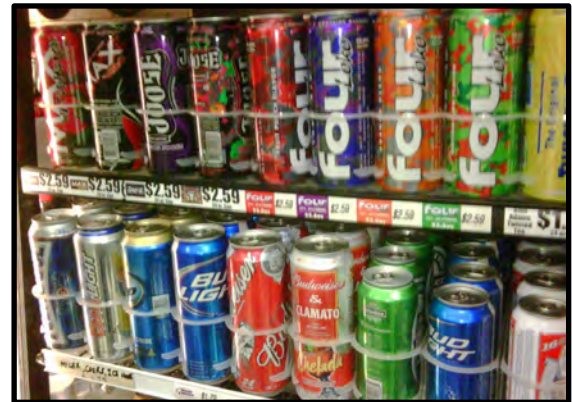


Figure 2 Display and marketing alcopops and RTD's Images captured by Benjamin O'Brien

when describing consumption of the product or how it makes you feel. Likewise, alcohol use has been portrayed in up to 80% of movies, and of most concern, it is present in up to 40% of child-rated movies, normalizing the use of alcohol beginning at an early age (7). These movies



Figure 3. Advertising alcoholic soda signs.
Image from Felice Boris-Rudin

include Disney classics like Peter Pan, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame which all feature scenes portraying the consumption and overconsumption of alcohol sometimes by characters with ambiguous ages. Further, the logo designs and names of many alcopops are also meant to entice a younger buyer by being bright and colorful, featuring a pattern, or using an exciting flavor in the beverage like mountain dew or tea (Figure 2 and 3). Alcopop ads are also extremely common on social media where no age gating exists, and further exposes minors to content tying alcopop consumption with positive themes.

How do sales practices increase Alcopop consumption and awareness?

In addition to the harmful marketing and ad campaigns of large alcohol producers, harmful sales practices at local stores also contribute to youth consumption of alcopops. This includes practices like keeping alcopops intermixed in coolers with energy drinks, soda, and other nonalcoholic products, and placing alcohol beverages lower or near the ground, at toddler or youth eye level. These behaviors further contribute to increased product awareness, acceptability, and normalization of youth consumption. Within Wisconsin, the Counter Tools Retail Assessment Project scanned 781 retailers statewide from 2017-2018 and published the results in 2019 (8). They found 54% of scanned retailers sold non-alcohol beverages in the same or adjacent cooler as alcohol beverages and 71% had alcohol ads or products within three feet or less of the floor (8). Finally, the simple decision to sell alcopops at a local store can have consequences, as it has been found that the amount of shelf space allocated for alcopops within neighborhood stores is correlated with neighborhood violence (9, 13). Of scanned retailers in the 2019 Counter Tools study, 82% sold flavored malt beverages and 78% sold single-serving malt beverages (8). These data provide straightforward evidence of the prevalence of alcopops within our state and the commonality of single-serving options.

What can we do?

To Limit Consumption:

1. Increase alcopop tax in line with distilled spirits (12)
2. Eliminate the sale of cold, single-serving alcohol products through municipal ordinances (14)
3. Prohibit sale of alcohol beverages at gas stations and convenience stores (14)

To Limit Advertising & Harmful Sales Practices:

1. Prohibit alcohol beverage placement below 3 feet (14)
2. Prohibit alcohol beverage placement near child-oriented products such as toys, sodas, snacks, and near healthy foods such as the produce display (12)
3. Do not allow alcohol beverage ads on municipal property (10, 11)
4. Local adoption of stricter sign codes limiting size and placement (14)
5. Adopt Municipal ordinances to not allow alcohol products in the same cooler as nonalcoholic products (14)

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