

# Alcoholic Energy Drinks

A Report to the Joint Subcommittee  
on Strategies and Models for the  
Prevention and Treatment of Substance Abuse

November 16, 2010

# What are alcoholic energy drinks?

- Alcoholic energy drinks (AEDs) are alcoholic beverages (most commonly malt beverages) mixed with caffeine and other stimulants
  - The addition of caffeine and other stimulants is intended to help consumers “drink more and party longer”
  - Pre-mixed and mix you own



# Encourages Binge Drinking

- AEDs have a much higher alcohol content than a typical beer -- up to 12%
- Usually sold in large, pop top cans -- up to 23.5 OZ
- One can may equal five “drinks” – serving sizes not indicated
  - Five+ beers
  - 5 shots of liquor
  - One bottle of wine
- Intended to be drank in one sitting--sole purpose is to get drunk

# Marketed to young people

- Include fruit juice and other flavorings—  
don't look or taste like beer
- Packaged to appeal to young people and  
to look like non-alcoholic energy drinks
- Very inexpensive--\$2.50 to \$3.00
- Marketing via non-traditional media
  - An attempt avoid drawing the attention of  
parents and community leaders?

# Who drinks AEDs?

- Not much information
- One study in North Carolina (O'Brien et al., 2008) found:
  - 68% of college students drank in the previous month, and 24% of them drank an AED on at least one day
  - Particularly popular among white males and fraternity and sorority members
- Anecdotal reports of up to 90% of youth in treatment for substance abuse consume AEDs



# Why are they dangerous?

- Consume more alcohol per episode of drinking
  - Caffeine counteracts the depressant effects of alcohol
- Caffeine reduces the drinker's ability to tell when he/she is drunk—they feel less drunk (e.g., Marczinski, et al., 2006)
  - But, some studies show same deficits in motor coordination and visual response time (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2006)
- As a result, more likely to engage in risky behavior (e.g., driving)

# Unknown Health Effects

- Little research on acute health effects, but seems to be associated with “alcohol poisoning”
  - Central Washington University – 9 students hospitalized in one incident with BACs of .123 to .35-- .30 or more considered potentially fatal
  - Ramapo College –23 students hospitalized this fall
- No research on long-term effects of combining alcohol, caffeine and other common ingredients
- Given consumers’ age and increased consumption, may increase likelihood of developing alcohol dependence



# Public Health Consequences (O'Brien et al., 2008)

- Twice as likely to binge drink,
- Drink more per episode of drinking (1.4 more drinks)
- More than twice as likely to take advantage of someone sexually and nearly twice as likely to be taken advantage of sexually
- More than twice as likely to get hurt or injured
- More than twice as likely to require medical treatment

Caveat: Correlational study doesn't prove causality

# Mix Your Own AEDs—Another Dangerous Trend

- Mixing energy drinks with distilled spirits has become very popular in nightclubs
- Examples include:
  - Red Bull and Vodka
  - Red Bull and Jagermeister (“Jagerbomb”)
- Same effects as pre-mixed AEDs
- Florida study -- bar patrons using AmEDs 3 times as likely to leave drunk and 4 times as likely to report that they intended to drive (Thombs, 2009)

# Summary

- AEDs' packaging and high alcohol content encourages alcohol intoxication
- Marketing is targeted to young people
  - Increases likelihood of consumption by minors
- Associated with increases in alcohol consumption, risky behavior, injury and sexual violence
- Long-term health consequences are unknown

# State Responses

- Michigan and Washington have banned the sale of AEDs
- In Utah and Montana, AEDs have been reclassified as distilled spirits
- New York's largest beer distributors agreed to stop selling caffeinated alcoholic drinks
- The Indiana Association of Beverage Retailers is asking the state to ban high-alcohol, high-energy drinks

# Recommendations

- The General Assembly should ban alcoholic energy drinks in the Commonwealth.
- If the General Assembly chooses not to ban alcoholic energy drinks in Virginia, the General Assembly should:
  - Provide funding to the Governor's Office of Substance Abuse Prevention to conduct a public awareness campaign about alcoholic energy drinks, their effects, and the associated dangers.
  - Provide additional funding to the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control to conduct compliance checks on sales of alcoholic energy drinks.

# Recommendations (cont'd)

- Consider re-classifying alcoholic energy drinks in a manner that would provide for the sale of these beverages through package stores only.
- Increase the tax on alcoholic energy drinks to reduce consumption; funds received as a result of this tax should be allocated to substance abuse prevention and treatment services.
- Require warning labels on premixed alcoholic energy drinks sold in the Commonwealth (California requires labeling).
- Prohibit the mixing of alcohol and energy drinks in restaurants and other establishments that serve alcohol.