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## Alcoholic energy drinks generate dangerous buzz

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They can lead to headaches and blackouts. They can leave your stomach reeling the next morning. Consuming them increases your risk of injury and being taken advantage of sexually.

Alcoholic energy drinks such as Joose, Four Loko and Rockstar21 might be college students' not-so-well-kept secret to getting drunk and partying longer, but some health officials say AEDs are more dangerous than students think.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they eventually got banned," said Adam Stern, a sophomore who said he has tried such products but no longer finds them appealing.

Nearly 25 percent of college students mix alcohol and energy drinks, according to a 2008 study published by the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine.

Premixed AEDs can contain 35-50 percent alcohol by volume, according to the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control.

Most students drink them at parties, while dancing or in a club atmosphere where they want to be the "life of the party," Stern said.

Combining alcohol (a depressant) with caffeine (a stimulant) might make drinkers feel less intoxicated than they actually are. This can lead to greater likelihood of engaging in risky behavior, such as drunken driving, said Kathleen Miller, a scientist at the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions.

Drinking AEDs is "like having one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake," Miller said.

"You don't look or feel as drunk as you are."

Because the products impair a person's judgment, they have been linked to severe alcohol-related consequences.

"An alcohol serving with caffeine appears to make people not realize they're getting in to trouble," said Linda Hancock, director of the VCU Wellness Resource Center.

The packaging for AEDs often disguises or omits facts such as caffeine content and the number of servings per container, which can lead to confusion regarding what the products contain.

AEDs typically come in cans the size of Arizona Iced Tea and are marketed as single-serving containers. One can of Four Loko, however, contains almost six servings, Hancock said.

"Once you pop the top on that, it's almost impossible to drink responsibly."

AEDs also include energy-boosting ingredients such as taurine and guarana in unspecified amounts. Taurine is an amino acid that affects one's heart; guarana is a dietary supplement that might be linked to seizures.

According to junior Jessica Dodson, poorly identified ingredients are not the only marketing deception with AEDs.

She said she poured a can of Joose Red Label into a cup and saw the liquid was actually lime-green.

"Lime-green can't be good," she said.

Since the arrival of AEDs on the market over the past few years, state officials have taken steps to regulate the drinks' sale.

Responding to pressure from 29 state attorneys general, in 2007 Anheuser-Busch discontinued production of Spykes, its popular alcoholic energy drink.

In Virginia, a new law mandated that all AEDs be placed with other alcoholic beverages in stores. The Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control has also launched a product recognition campaign to raise awareness about the products among consumers and sellers.

According to an article on the MSNBC Web site, in a printed statement John Kaestner, vice president of consumer affairs for Anheuser-Busch Companies Inc. in St. Louis, calls the reaction to Spykes "misguided and unfounded." He added that Spykes are clearly labeled as containing alcohol.

"The way to prevent underage drinking is not by limiting product choices for adults," the statement reads. "Rather, the solution is to prevent youth access to alcohol by training retailers to properly check IDs, supporting law enforcement officials in enforcing underage-drinking laws, and encouraging parents to set rules and consequences for their sons and daughters."

Education is the key to managing the dangers associated with alcoholic energy drinks, Hancock said.

"Don't do anything that could change everything," she said. "These are the types of products that could change everything."

### Sober facts about alcoholic energy drinks

Some alcoholic energy drinks are 50 percent alcohol and stronger than hard liquor.

The products' manufacturers target young consumers. Critics call them "alcopops," saying they are aimed at teenagers and others under 21.

They contain ingredients that are poorly described and may have unknown side effects.

Some contain up to 300 milligrams of caffeine, which is equivalent to three cups of coffee.

Drinking AEDs increases a drinker's risk of suffering physical injury and needing medical treatment, being taken advantage of sexually, or taking advantage of someone else, riding with an intoxicated driver, and acting aggressively.

Information provided by The Marin Institute; the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine; and the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control

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