



CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Underage drinkers' favorite brands linked to alcohol ads

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The brands of alcohol that underage drinkers choose most often also happen to be the ones advertised in magazines read most often by that age group, according to a new U.S. study.

"We've got at least 14 long-term studies that have looked at young people's exposure to alcohol advertising and found that the more exposed they are the more likely that they are to start drinking or if already drinking, to drink more," David Jernigan, the study's senior author, told Reuters Health.

"So we try to monitor youth exposure to that advertising because it's a risk factor for underage drinking," said Jernigan, who is director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) at The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Young people between 18 and 20 years old are in the age group with the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking and alcohol use disorders, he and his colleagues write in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

According to current self-imposed industry standards, alcohol ads should only be placed in magazines with less than 30 percent of readers under 21 years old. But even though the magazines follow those standards, many underage drinkers see those ads anyway, the authors say.

To see if there are links between the ads young people see and the alcohol brands they choose most often, the researchers examined ads that ran in 124 national magazines during 2011.

They matched those ads to magazine readership data so they could determine which of those ads were more likely to be seen by 18-to-20-year-olds.

The researchers discovered that advertisements for the 25 alcohol brands most popular with underage drinkers were also more likely to appear in the magazines read by that age group, when compared to the 308 less popular brands.

In addition, for manufacturers of 11 of the 25 brands most popular with underage males that age group was the most heavily exposed to their ads. The same was true for 16 of the top 25 brands among underage females.

In all, those popular brands were five times more likely to have 18-to-20-year-old females and nine times more likely to have 18-to-20-year-old males in their most heavily exposed audience, compared with all other brands.

The authors say it's unlikely this exposure is the accidental result of "spillover" advertising aimed at legal age drinkers.

The study didn't examine the drinking behaviors of magazine readers and does not prove that young people choose these brands because of advertising, they caution.

"It's striking that we looked at the top 25 brands among males and the top 25 among females and 308 other brands managed to reach the legal aged audience more effectively than the underage audience," Jernigan said.

"We can't make a causal arrow 'cause this is a one point in time study, but nonetheless it's very striking," he said.

Jernigan said it's important for parents to know that kids are seeing a lot of alcohol advertising and they see different ads than older people see. By the same token, he added, the ads young people see most don't reach the other age groups as effectively so parents are much less likely to see them.

"We sometimes call this advertising that flies under the parental radar," he said.

But the findings show it's possible to aim the advertising in a way that it doesn't reach underage kids, he added.

"It is possible," Jernigan said. "These brands ought to be able to do it."

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