

Alcohol ads on TV tied to youth drinking risk

 [reuters.com/article/2015/01/21/us-alcohol-marketing-youth-idUSKBN0KU2QB20150121](https://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/21/us-alcohol-marketing-youth-idUSKBN0KU2QB20150121)

By Andrew M. Seaman

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(Reuters Health) – Young people who are more receptive to alcohol ads on TV may be at higher risk of problem drinking over the next few years, according to a new study.

“If you compare low- to high-receptivity kids, their risk of transitioning to binge drinking was over four times higher,” said Dr. James Sargent, the study’s senior author from the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

Sargent and his colleagues write in *JAMA Pediatrics* that in 2013, about two thirds of U.S. high school students reported drinking. About a third reported drinking in the past month, and about one in five reported recent binge drinking, that is, five or more drinks on one occasion.

Previous research tried to establish a link between TV alcohol advertisements and young people's drinking behaviors, but with conflicting results.

For the new study, the researchers applied a method previously used to find a link between smoking shown in movies and people's smoking behavior. The method involves showing people ads stripped of brands, to see what they can recall from having seen the ad on TV.

In 2010 and 2011, more than 3,000 people ages 15 to 23 answered a series of questions over the phone and then finished the image portion of the study online. Two years later, 1,596 participants completed follow-up surveys.

The youngest participants were only slightly less likely than the oldest ones - about 23 percent versus 26 percent - to report having seen alcohol ads, to like the ads they saw and to identify the alcohol brands in the ads.

Liking and remembering ads was considered a sign of greater receptivity to the advertising message. And at the two-year follow-up, participants who had scored highest for receptivity were more likely to have transitioned to drinking, binge drinking and hazardous drinking.

“This study suggests that alcohol marketing does affect subsequent drinking behaviors,” Sargent said.

He said they also checked for a link between fast food TV ads and drinking behaviors. There was no connection, which reduces the chance that children who progressed to drinking were simply more susceptible to ads in general.

Sam Zakhari, chief scientist of the Distilled Spirits Council, wrote in a statement to Reuters Health that new research is driven by advocacy – not science.

“The clearest indication of this is that according to the U.S. government, underage drinking is at historic lows, yet advertising and marketing are at all-time highs,” Zakhari said. “The multiple flaws in this study undercuts the credibility of its conclusions.”

Zakhari, a former director at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, said, “research shows

that advertising does not cause someone to begin drinking alcohol or to drink more.”

Previous studies have found links between advertising and drinking behaviors, however.

Last year, researchers found that the preferred brands of alcohol among underage drinkers match brands advertised in the most popular magazines in that age group.

David Jernigan, lead author of the 2014 study, said the new work by Sargent and colleagues is “yet another study showing that exposure to alcohol advertising on TV is associated with young people progressing to more hazardous drinking.”

“This is the kind of research we need to inform a robust policy debate about what we can do that will actually protect kids,” said Jernigan, who directs the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore and was not involved in the new study.

Jernigan said his research suggests there are ways for companies to target people of legal drinking age on TV without influencing underage viewers. One way is to target ads at people closer to 30 and older.

“Alcohol advertising is aimed at 21 to 25 or 28 year olds,” said Sargent. “Given the similarity in terms of psychology of 21 year olds and 18 year olds and 17 year olds, and the similarity of the programs that they watch, it’s really absurd that you can have advertisements that target 21 year olds without influencing a 17 or 18 year old. It’s just really common sense.”

SOURCE: bit.ly/1xzEzny JAMA Pediatrics, online January 19, 2015.