

The Province

Booze ads should come with warning, expert says, citing effects on young girls

By Gordon McIntyre and Graham Slaughter, The Province June 10, 2013



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Photograph by: File photo , Getty Images

Alcohol ads and bottle labels should come with warnings similar to the ones on cigarette packages to caution young girls about the side effects of consumption, a spokesman for the Canadian Medical Association said in an editorial on Monday.

“Girls as young as 13 are now reported to be consuming as much alcohol and as early in life as boys,” Dr. Ken Flegel wrote in the CMA’s Journal. “Research has shown that exposure of adolescent girls to alcohol advertising has increased and that such exposure was associated with increased alcohol consumption in adolescents.”

Alcohol companies cannot legally target under-age drinkers, but young girls can’t help but pick up by osmosis the lifestyle, fun and peer acceptance suggested in ads they see in fashion magazines and during popular TV shows, experts say.

“Young girls spend more time on the Net, they spend more time watching television, they spend more time flipping through magazines,” said Flegel, a general internist and a professor at McGill University in Montreal.

Because a young girl’s body processes alcohol differently than do boys’ bodies at the same age, there are increased health risks, Flegel said.

These include increased risk of cancer of the breasts, throat, intestines and liver, as well Hep B, alcohol poisoning, heart disease, cirrhosis, altered menstrual cycles and dementia.

“The younger a girl, or boy, starts binge drinking, the more concern there is,” said Art Steinmann, manager of substance abuse prevention with the Vancouver School Board. “The best advice is to put off or delay your first drink, that’s a big part of our thrust.”

In other words, 16 is a better age to try a first drink than 14, 18 is better than 16, and so on.

“Those who are experimenting, we caution about the effects,” Steinmann said. “Those who are regular drinkers, we talk about cutting back or discontinuing consumption.”

Both Steinmann and the CMA point out that strong connections to family, school and community help keep kids from abusing alcohol.

“The manufacturers of alcohol insist they don’t target under-age drinking, but if you look at the content of their ads that’s a questionable assertion,” Steinmann said. “We help kids look at those ads critically.”

One study in the U.S. by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University claims that girls 13 to 15 are exposed to more alcohol marketing than women at the legal drinking age and that they are exposed to almost double the amount of alcohol ads as an average 35-year-old is.

Much of it is in magazines such as Cosmopolitan and Vogue, Dr. David Jernigan, director of research at CAMY, said when the study came out.

“It flies under parents’ radar because we don’t listen, watch or read the same things,” Jernigan said. “Surprise, surprise, studies show that the more alcohol advertising teens are exposed to, the more likely they are to drink.”

Targeting women to drink more began more than 30 years ago when light beer was invented, marketing professor Lindsay Meredith said.

In recent years, alcohol companies have shifted their focus to developing “alcopops” – fruity products such as tropical coolers, bottled cocktails and mojito-flavoured beer.

“These are becoming increasingly popular among young women, some who are too young to drink them,” said Meredith, who teaches marketing strategy at Simon Fraser University.

Canadian law restricts companies from overtly advertising alcohol products to minors. But the Internet has blurred the borders for boozy ads, allowing lax American messages into Canada, Meredith said.

“Internet ads and social networking sites are the weapon of choice if you’re trying to get ahold of young people,” he said. “Certainly we get a lot of spillover ads from the States that you would never find here.”

The debate has been plagued by a grey zone of perception. While a concerned parent might see an ad as an enticement for their young daughter, an advertising executive could say it was intended for an older audience.

“If you advertise alcohol to a 19-year-old and a 13-year-old sees the ad, there’s nothing illegal about that,” said Meredith.

The problem happens when young “wannabes” start seeing ads outside their age demographic, Meredith said.

“You get 10-year-olds wanting to be 12, and 15-year-olds wanting to be 19,” he said. “It’s unavoidable.”

Added Charles Weinberg, a professor of marketing at UBC: “Every year a certain number of people reach the legal drinking age and alcohol companies are continually trying to reach that market of new drinkers.

“It’s safe to say there’s a certain blurring of the lines, that people younger than 19 see the same media, so see the same ads.”