

Owning alcohol-branded merchandise associated with teen drinking behaviors

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A Dartmouth-led study of young U.S. teens showed that between 11 and 20 percent own T-shirts or other items featuring an alcohol brand, and those who do appear more likely to transition through the stages of drinking from susceptibility, to beginning drinking, to binge drinking, according to a report in the March issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Alcohol-branded merchandise includes T-shirts, hats or other items that feature a particular brand of beverage, according to background information in the article. Increasing evidence suggests that this specialized type of marketing effectively reaches teenagers and is associated with alcohol use.

Auden C. McClure, M.D., M.P.H., of Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center (DHMC), Lebanon, N.H., and colleagues conducted a telephone survey of a representative sample of 6,522 U.S. adolescents ages 10 to 14 years in 2003 during which teens reported information about their drinking behaviors and drinking attitudes. In three follow-up surveys conducted at eight-month intervals, participants answered questions about changes in drinking habits and ownership of alcohol-branded merchandise.

The most commonly owned products were clothing (64 percent) and headwear (24 percent). Seventy-five percent of items displayed beer labels, including 45 percent that featured Budweiser. Most were obtained through family and friends but some 24 percent of them were purchased

directly by teens.

Among teens that had never drunk alcohol, owning alcohol-branded merchandise and positive attitudes toward drinking were both related, with each predicting the other during an eight-month follow up period. In addition, both predicted the initiation of alcohol use and binge drinking, even after controlling for other risk factors, like whether friends and parents drank alcohol, or whether alcohol was available in the home.

"Alcohol-branded merchandise is widely distributed among U.S. adolescents, who report obtaining the items primarily through friends and family but also through direct purchase" said Dr. McClure. "This is one of many studies linking ownership of these items to teen drinking, and the consistency of the results indicates that alcohol branded merchandise is one cause of problematic drinking during adolescence. This study shows that ownership is associated with binge drinking, a cause of death and injury during adolescence."

"In the Master Settlement Agreement, the tobacco industry gave up distributing similar items, after it was shown that they were a cause of teen smoking." said James Sargent, M.D., the senior coauthor. "It's hard to imagine an industry more irresponsible than big tobacco, but the beer industry is way behind in limiting advertising that affects teens. Anheuser-Busch could make almost half of this problem go away just by unilaterally ending distribution of Budweiser alcohol-branded merchandise."

The authors note that some 3 million teens own alcohol branded merchandise, despite a Beer Industry Code provision that "No beer identification, including logos, trademarks, or names should be used or licensed for use on clothing, toys, games or game equipment, or other materials intended for use primarily by persons below the legal drinking

age," showing clearly that industry self regulation has had little effect on restraining the proliferation of these items among youth. The study is accompanied by an editorial calling for government oversight and regulation of alcohol-branded merchandise because of the failure of voluntary self regulation by the industry. "What we need is a Master Settlement Agreement with the alcohol industry," says Sargent.

Source: Dartmouth Medical School

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