

Students risking health with alcohol and energy drink mix

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New research has found a link between drinking alcohol mixed with energy drinks and risk-taking behaviour. Credit: AdamChandler/Flickr, CC BY

Young people are fuelling big nights out by drinking alcohol mixed with energy drinks to help them party through the night, according to a new Victorian government [report](#).

The VicHealth report found that people who mix their [alcohol](#) with energy drinks are also more likely to be problem gamblers, show other risk-taking behaviour such as heavy alcohol use or illicit drug use, and report more [mental health problems](#).

Executive Manager Dr Bruce Bolam from VicHealth, which funded the studies, said while overall levels of consumption of these products was relatively low compared to beer or wine in the wider population, in [young people](#) the level of consumption was very high.

"Alarmingly over one-third of Deakin University students included in one survey reported energy drinks mixed with alcohol being consumed in the past three months," he said.

"Clearly a lot of the research identified that people consume energy drinks mixed with alcohol to either get a night started or to keep going and also to mask the effects of intoxication.

"Unfortunately the evidence shows this leads to significantly higher levels of intoxication, risk-taking and potential harm."

Among school-leavers celebrating in Lorne and Torquay on the Victorian coast, 16% of schoolies surveyed said they had drunk alcohol mixed with energy drinks in the past 12 hours.

The study also found one in five 18 to 24 year-olds and one in ten 25 to 39 year-olds reported drinking alcohol mixed with energy drinks in the past three months.

Concerns about heart health

Chris Semsarian, a cardiologist and professor of medicine at the University of Sydney, who was not involved in the study, said the health

and medical implications of young people drinking large volumes of energy drinks, with or without alcohol, was a concern.

"There is growing evidence that energy drinks, either alone or mixed with alcohol, can lead to serious cardiovascular effects, including increases in blood pressure, heart rate, life threatening rhythm abnormalities, and even cardiac arrest and sudden death," he said.

VicHealth's Dr Bolam said policymakers need to consider that the mix of alcohol and energy drinks is volatile, particularly at night.

"Price, availability and promotion of these products needs to be considered in policy-making."

Professor Sandra Jones, director of the Centre for Health and Social Research at the Australian Catholic University, who was not involved in the study, said:

"The research we've done in my team has been with quite young people - [high school](#) students and university students – and what we've typically [found](#) is that they consume these products to help them stay awake and keep drinking. It's the 'life of the party' motive."

Packaging and image play a role

Professor Jones said the packaging and the image of the products also appealed to high school students as it wasn't [immediately obvious](#) to adults that the prepackaged products contained alcohol.

"They also know the taste of energy drinks already and are comfortable and familiar with the product," she said.

"One of the very sensible suggestions in the report is around restriction

on their sale in night-time entertainment precincts after certain times; those sorts of strategies are certain to have more of an impact than telling people 'don't drink this because it's bad for you'," Professor Jones said.

The researchers carried out six separate studies over three years to look at the pattern of drinking in young people.

Their research included watching pub goers across five Australian cities, conducting online and phone surveys, interviewing school-leavers in the street at schoolies events, analysing ambulance data and interviewing 25 young people who drank alcohol mixed with [energy drinks](#).

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