

CAFFEINE AND ALCOHOL DRINK IS POTENT MIX FOR YOUNG

Mixing alcohol and caffeine is hardly a new concept, but a rash of cases involving students who landed at hospitals after drinking beverages that combine the two in a single large can has alarmed health officials around the country.

The drinks are dangerous, doctors say, because the caffeine masks the effects of the alcohol, keeping consumers from realizing just how intoxicated they are.

A brand called Four Loko — a fruit-flavored malt beverage that has an alcohol content of 12 percent and as much caffeine as a cup of coffee — has come under particular scrutiny after students who drank it this fall in New Jersey and Washington ended up in emergency rooms, some with high levels of alcohol poisoning.

“This is one of the most dangerous new alcohol concoctions I have ever seen,” said an emergency room doctor at Lancaster General Hospital, who said he had treated more than a dozen teenagers over the last three months who had been brought there after drinking Four Loko. “It’s a recipe for disaster because your body’s natural defense is to get sleepy and not want to drink, but in this case you’re tricking the body with the caffeine.”

The Food and Drug Administration is reviewing whether the drinks are safe. And in July, the Senator of New York asked to investigate whether the drinks, with colorful packaging and flavors like watermelon or lemon-lime, are “explicitly designed to attract under-age drinkers.” Lawmakers in several states have sought to ban the drinks, though no legislation has passed yet. (...)

Chris Hunter, the managing partner of the Chicago company that owns Four Loko, said Tuesday that the drink, introduced in August 2008, was being unfairly singled out. The company takes steps to prevent its products from getting into the hands of minors, he said.

“Alcohol misuse and abuse and under-age drinking are issues the industry faces and all of us would like to address,” Mr. Hunter said. “The singling out or banning of one product is not going to solve that. Consumer education is what’s going to do it” (...).

Students around the country said that Four Loko and similar drinks were catching on among their peers because they were cheap and potent yet did not taste like alcohol. (...)

Mr. Hunter said their drink “has seven spots on its label that identify it as an alcoholic product. We go above and beyond industry standards”.

Critics, though, say that the brightly colored cans Four Loko comes in look like iced tea, soda or energy drink containers, and that it is easy to mistake the product for nonalcoholic drinks.

“I’ve talked to parents who were shocked because the can was in their refrigerator and they didn’t realize it was an alcoholic beverage,” Dr. Reihart said. “It looks like every other energy drink out there”.

Adapted from *The New York Times*

October 2010

(2 797 characters)