

Products mimicking alcohol.

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What is it?

Product(s) mimicking alcohol: ultra-low alcohol content products containing less than 0.5% alcohol by volume (ABV), and products with 0% ABV, that feature the branding of established alcohol companies, and/or are designed to imitate the flavour, packaging, or overall appearance of alcohol products.

New iterations of products mimicking alcohol have been trending in the early 2020s, with claims of improved flavour and quality compared to the limited ranges of non-alcoholic (or very low alcohol content) wine and beer that have been sold for decades.¹

The category now includes products mimicking spirits and craft beer, in addition to more traditional red and white wine, sparkling wine, and beer.

Products are mixed between brands without alcoholic counterparts and range extensions of existing alcohol brands. They are being sold in store and online by liquor retailers, by retailers who specialise in products mimicking alcohol, and in grocery store chains.

Why?

There is currently limited evidence available on the impact of products mimicking alcohol.

While, for some adults, the impact may be neutral or even positive, there are concerns around potential negative impacts on people under 18 that make taking preventative action now important to avoid these potential harms occurring.

Risks for young people

There are concerns that the alcohol industry may use products mimicking alcohol to increase awareness and acceptability of alcohol products and brands among young people.²

The potential risks include increased brand exposure, developing norms around alcohol, early habit formation, and the increased palatability of alcohol.

Increased brand exposure

Exposure to a brand works cumulatively to build brand awareness and an image that influences purchase. Advertisements, sponsorships, or merchandise for products mimicking alcohol, particularly products that are extensions of established alcohol brands, contributes to this cumulative brand exposure.

Selling products mimicking alcohol in supermarkets gives young people an additional layer of alcohol brand exposure every time they see those products displayed, alongside soft drinks and juices.

This brand exposure in a grocery store is typically in addition to existing marketing from an established alcohol brand, which may also sponsor a sports team, advertise during televised sport including during children’s viewing times, and run ads on billboards and public transport.

All these facets of marketing contribute to how young people think about alcohol and alcohol brands.

In fact, it was similar concerns about how attractive designs and logos on tobacco packaging served as a ‘mobile billboard’ that led to the introduction of plain packaging laws.³

The potential risk of repeated brand exposure to young people would be reduced if products mimicking alcohol were subject to the same sale and advertising restrictions as alcohol.

Knowledge of alcohol and the development of social norms

Evidence indicates that children start to develop knowledge and recognition of alcohol from two years of age, onwards. This includes knowing the smell of alcohol and the ability to distinguish between images of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.⁴⁻⁶

Between the ages of four and eight, children's knowledge increases about social norms regarding alcohol consumption, such as learning where and when drinking is considered a common behaviour.⁷

Because products mimicking alcohol are designed to copy the smell, taste, and look of alcohol products, it's possible that children will not be able to easily tell the difference between a mimic product and an alcohol product.

Consequently, when young children see people drinking products mimicking alcohol, they are likely to assume the drink is actually alcohol.

This is particularly problematic if products mimicking alcohol are being drunk by adults in situations where they wouldn't normally drink alcohol – such as driving a car or boat (both scenarios suggested in advertisements for products mimicking alcohol by a leading alcohol brand!).

In this situation, young people watching could perceive that alcohol is actually being drunk more frequently than it is and potentially in inappropriate or illegal situations. This could negatively impact the social norms that a child develops around alcohol.

Additionally, if children see other people under 18 years of age drinking products mimicking alcohol, it could look like youth alcohol consumption is common and socially acceptable for under 18s.

To avoid this, we must not normalise people under 18 years of age drinking products that look, smell, and taste like alcohol.

These potential risks could be reduced if adults are aware of potential impacts of role modelling, and people under 18 were not sold or encouraged to consume products mimicking alcohol.

Early habit formation

Our behaviour is strongly shaped by repetition and rituals and what is sometimes referred to as 'habits'.

Once formed, habits can be hard to break. For example, the habitual use of alcohol by adults – such as regularly drinking after work – can make it difficult for them if they decide to try to reduce or cease drinking alcohol.⁸

Similarly, there is a risk that drinking products mimicking alcohol by someone under 18 years – such as at dinners, after school, while watching sporting events, or after participating in sport – will affect a young person's future consumption of alcohol.

Consider a scenario where a young person regularly observes their parents having one or more alcoholic beverages after work or with dinner. If that young person does the same with a product that looks, smells, and tastes like alcohol, the habit could be well established by the time they turn 18, when it may 'graduate' to drinking alcohol instead. Such a long-established habit could prove particularly hard to change in the future.

This potential risk could be reduced if people under 18 were not sold or encouraged to consume products mimicking alcohol.

Palatability

Many forms of alcohol are often found to be unpalatable when young people first consume it, which is why high sugar content premixed drinks, or 'alcopops', are popular among younger drinkers.⁹ People who continue drinking typically report that the flavour improves over time until the taste itself becomes a motivator for drinking alcohol.

There is a risk that starting to consume products mimicking the flavour and smell of alcohol at a younger age may make alcohol more palatable earlier.

This potential risk could be reduced if people under 18 were not sold or encouraged to consume products mimicking alcohol.



Challenges for schools and parents

Parents and schools may require support to manage situations where parents are confused or disagree on appropriateness around products mimicking alcohol being given to young people or sent to school.

Recently, conflict emerged when a mother posted images of her child's lunchbox on social media, containing a product mimicking alcohol that is a brand extension of a vodka spritzer. While many people commenting on the post were critical of it, the mother responded claiming the picture was "just a joke".¹⁰

This potential risk could be reduced if adults don't give or encourage people under 18 to consume products mimicking alcohol.

Potential impacts on adults

Substitution for alcohol

Products mimicking alcohol may provide a healthier alternative to alcohol for adults, and it could be useful for them to be consistently available in bars and restaurants and at social events. This would assist in the continuing normalisation of reduced alcohol consumption.

While it's unclear to what extent substitution of alcoholic beverages may occur, a 2021 Australian review suggested that the likelihood of substitution will probably differ depending on an individual's motives for alcohol consumption.²

For example, if someone is consuming alcohol - either in part or primarily - to experience the effects, such as reduced inhibitions or feeling intoxicated, they are unlikely to choose products mimicking alcohol because they won't produce the desired effects.

Conversely, a person who is consuming alcohol for the flavour, to feel part of a group, or to follow perceived social protocols (e.g., toasts at special occasions) may be more likely to make the switch.

While critics of products mimicking alcohol argue that even substitution maintains the centrality of alcohol in social life, it is also a pragmatic approach to the current drinking culture and may support some people to drink less alcohol.

There are potential benefits for adults to substitute alcohol with products mimicking alcohol.

Consistently providing these alternatives at bars and social events could help normalise reducing alcohol intake.

Addition to alcohol

Some adults will drink products mimicking alcohol **in addition to** their current alcohol consumption. There are two possible scenarios:

1. products mimicking alcohol are substituted for non-alcoholic drinks (such as soft drinks, coffee, etc.)
2. products mimicking alcohol are consumed in situations where previously no drinks would be consumed.

In the first case, any public health benefit would depend on whether the products mimicking alcohol are more or less healthy than the currently consumed non-alcoholic drinks that they replace.

In the second case, there would be no public benefit, given that products mimicking alcohol are a discretionary food choice, like soft drinks, that add energy (kilojoules) into a person's diet without providing essential nutrients.¹¹

How are these products being marketed?

To help us understand if adults are more likely to substitute products mimicking alcohol, or drink them in addition to alcohol, it's helpful to look at how they are being marketed.

Companies seem to be taking different approaches as to how they position their products. The retailer Sans Drinks overtly markets their products mimicking alcohol as alternatives to alcohol (e.g., listing 'Champagne alternatives' as a product category on their website).ⁱ

ⁱ <https://sansdrinks.com.au/> [accessed 12/02/2022]



On the other hand, brands such as Heineken¹² and Carlton,¹³ have adopted an addition to alcohol approach, marketing their beer mimicking products for consumption at times and in places where it is inappropriate or illegal to drink alcohol.ⁱⁱ

In fact, Heineken's ad campaign for 'Heineken 0.0' uses the tag line: "That moment you couldn't have a beer... Now you can." Its ads depict people variously driving a car, preparing to drive a boat with a water-skiing friend, and during a work meeting.ⁱⁱⁱ

More research and preventative action are needed

While we don't yet know the extent of the impact these products will have, there are credible concerns about risks for young people and potential benefits for adults.

By proactively placing restrictions on products mimicking alcohol, such as reducing young people's brand exposure and not selling them to young people, we can help to mitigate any negative impacts, without waiting for that harm to occur rather than try to reverse it once it has.

These restrictions will not prevent adults from enjoying any benefits from substitution for alcohol. Rather, they will help protect young people while further research is conducted into what longer term impact these products will have.

ADF positions:

1. Products mimicking alcohol should be subject to the same advertising and place of sale restrictions to which alcoholic products are subject.
2. People under 18 should not be sold or encouraged to consume products mimicking alcohol.
3. Further research is required to explore the impact of products mimicking alcohol on alcohol consumption and perceptions about alcohol in Australia.

ii The ABAC Carlton 0 determination provides another example of the depictions of swimming, operating machinery, and driving a race car: <http://www.abac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/207-20-Determination-Carlton-Zero-14-January-2021.pdf> [accessed 12/02/2022]

iii <https://www.heineken.com/au/en/campaigns/heineken-0-0> [accessed 12/02/2022]

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