



A rapid narrative review of the evidence

Products Mimicking Alcohol

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Summary of findings

Background

The market for products mimicking alcohol (PMAs) has expanded rapidly in Australia and internationally. While these products are increasingly promoted as alcohol harm-reduction tools, concerns have been raised regarding increased acceptability of alcohol use, indirect marketing of alcohol brands, youth exposure and regulatory gaps. This review examined the available evidence on adolescent and adult alcohol use, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and harms associated with PMAs; parent knowledge, attitudes and behaviours relating to adolescent PMA use; and, system and regulatory issues.

Methods

A systematic search of literature published in the last ten years (from 2016) was conducted across four sources: the ADF Library (specialist alcohol and other drugs library), Google Scholar, PubMed Central and Google, supplemented by citation searching and environmental scans. Data were extracted using Covidence (web-based systematic review tool) and findings synthesised narratively.

Findings

Sixty-six studies were eligible for inclusion comprising cross-sectional ($n = 22$), qualitative ($n = 11$), experimental ($n = 10$), repeated cross-sectional ($n = 7$), time-series ($n = 6$), mixed methods ($n = 6$), policy analysis ($n = 2$), longitudinal/cohort ($n = 1$) and modelling ($n = 1$) designs. The evidence base was recent, with 73% of included studies published between 2024 and 2026.

There was limited evidence relating to adolescents, parents, harms and regulatory issues, with most available evidence focused on adult PMA use and attitudes.

Among adolescents, PMAs were frequently recognised as alcohol-related products, and exposure to PMA branding and advertising was associated with more favourable attitudes towards the associated alcohol brands. Parents generally expressed mixed and often cautious views regarding adolescent PMA use, with common concerns relating to making alcohol use seem more acceptable, gateway effects and exposure to alcohol branding. While available evidence did not demonstrate clear gateway effects, a lack of longitudinal evidence prevents this from being ruled out.

In large population surveys, weekly PMA use among adults was typically around 10-12%. Adult use was generally more common among heavier drinkers and more socioeconomically advantaged groups. Despite evidence of rapid market growth, PMAs generally accounted for less than 5% of alcohol sales or purchases in the jurisdictions studied. Evidence regarding whether PMAs are used as substitutes for alcohol or in addition to alcohol was mixed. PMAs may support alcohol reduction among some adult drinkers through substitution of higher-strength alcohol products. Studies examining attitudes found that adults commonly viewed PMAs positively as tools for moderation, social participation and avoiding intoxication.

Regulatory studies consistently highlighted substantial inconsistencies in definitions, labelling, taxation, marketing and availability, with many PMAs falling outside alcohol-specific regulatory frameworks, despite closely resembling alcohol products.

Conclusion

PMA's present both opportunities and challenges for alcohol harm reduction. Concerns regarding youth exposure, the potential for PMA's to make alcohol use seem more acceptable, brand extension and regulatory gaps remain unresolved, largely because the evidence on these issues is still emerging. At the same time, PMA's may provide benefits for some adults by supporting alcohol reduction and substitution, although evidence of broader population-level benefits remains limited. A cautious and evidence-informed approach to policy and regulation is warranted while the evidence base continues to develop.

Key messages

- PMA's are frequently recognised by adolescents as alcohol-related products, although evidence regarding whether PMA's contribute to later alcohol use remains inconclusive.
- Although PMA uptake is more common among heavier drinkers and more socioeconomically advantaged groups, it remains relatively low.
- Evidence of broader population-level health benefits limited with sustained reductions in alcohol use not well established.
- PMA's may support alcohol reduction for some adults through substitution of alcoholic beverages, particularly among existing drinkers seeking to moderate their consumption.
- Regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with market growth, highlighting the need for clearer definitions, labelling standards, availability and marketing controls and evidence-informed policy responses.

Key stats

- 66 studies were included in the review, with 73% published between 2024 and 2026.
- Weekly PMA use among adults was typically around 10-12% in large population surveys.
- Market research indicates that PMA availability and sales have increased substantially in recent years, although they still account for less than 5% of alcohol sales or purchases in the jurisdictions studied.

Declarations

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