

Alcohol-energy drink craze fueling concern

The alcoholic beverage Four Loko at Sai's Kwik Stop Friday, August 13, 2010.

By Kimberly C. Moore
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Dr. Dave Roberts, an emergency room physician at North Florida Regional Medical Center, has seen firsthand the effects excessive drinking can have on students - everything from vomiting to unconsciousness.

"They get so drunk, they can't function safely by themselves and need a place to recover," Roberts said.

The latest drinking craze on college campuses - and even at high school parties - is what many experts call a dangerous mix of caffeinated energy drinks and alcohol. Roberts said the drinks create a "triad of problems," by combining students, whose decision-making skills are underdeveloped, with alcohol, which impairs good decision-making, and caffeine, which simply makes them alert, but not quick to react.

"It's something that we're aware of, particularly in a college town," Roberts said. "It destroys your coordination and judgment."

Which leads some people to actually get behind the wheel of a car.

A University of Florida toxicologist reiterated a call to ban alcohol-energy drinks, saying they are unsafe.

"I don't - and my colleagues don't - believe there's any place for an alcohol-energy drink, especially because they're marketed toward younger people," said Dr. Bruce Goldberger, professor and director of toxicology at the University of Florida's College of Medicine.

Goldberger, along with four other medical professors from around the country, has sent a letter to state attorneys general to say the "consumption of caffeinated alcoholic beverages has been associated with increased risk of serious injury to oneself and to others as the result of driving while intoxicated, sexual assault and other dangerous behavior," including alcohol poisoning. University of Florida officials say they don't talk to students specifically about these drinks, but do have a discussion with incoming students about alcohol abuse.

"The use of combining energy drinks with alcohol has been going up in the last couple of years and has taken on a life of its own in a very negative way," said Maureen Miller, coordinator for the University of Florida's Alcohol & Other Drug Prevention at GatorWell. "This is an issue that is really gaining attention nationally."

And alcohol-energy drinks are coming under fire again after police say the malt-energy beverage Four Loko might have played a part in a St. Petersburg car accident two weeks ago in which a father and his three sons were killed, allegedly by an underage drunk driver.

St. Petersburg police say on July 31, 20-year-old Demetrius Jordan told them he had been drinking Four Loko and smoking marijuana before he ran a red light and slammed into another car, killing all four of the occupants: Elroy McConnel of Orlando and his adult sons Kelly, Nathan and Elroy McConnel III.

A study conducted by Goldberg and his associates shows that the combined use of caffeine and alcohol is increasing, with the reported prevalence among U.S. college students as high as 28 percent. University of Florida police say they have not had a problem with it, but Gainesville Police Cpl. Tscharna Senn said she has seen its effects on people when she worked the downtown detail for two years.

"It has so much more alcohol than a regular drink," Senn said. "You couple that with the caffeine and I think that's the draw."

That is also the danger, Goldberger said. One 23.5-ounce can has three times the percentage of alcohol as a beer and three to four times the caffeine of a Coke.

"Being wide awake and drunk at the same time increases the risk of engaging in several forms of violent or other high-risk physical behavior that can cause injury," Goldberger's letter states.

"College students who consumed alcohol mixed with energy drinks had a significantly higher prevalence of ... being taken advantage of sexually, taking advantage of someone else sexually, riding with a drunken driver and being physically injured, compared to students who drank alcohol alone."

Goldberger said young people who don't normally drink are in particular danger.

"If a young girl, say 100 pounds, drinks one, she'll have the blood alcohol level in the range to make her sick," he said.

GPD's Senn said underage drinkers who buy products like Four Loko know they are buying an alcoholic beverage and are arrested the same as an underage drinker buying a beer.

In fact, Four Loko products clearly state at the top of the can that it is an alcoholic beverage. But they market to a younger audience with what they acknowledge are "pop-off the shelves graphics." They say their wild Brazilian berry UVA drink "is truly a mind-blowing experience." Other flavors include Loko O.B. - orange with peach - blue raspberry, lemonade, cranberry lemonade, watermelon and fruit punch.

Chris Hunter, a founder and managing partner of Phusion Projects, which manufactures Four Loco, e-mailed a prepared statement to The Sun.

"People have safely enjoyed mixing alcohol and caffeine products for years in their homes, and in restaurants and bars," Hunter wrote. "Having coffee after a meal with wine, or consuming rum and cola, an Irish coffee or a Red Bull and vodka are all popular practices. However, only the pre-mixed, malt-based caffeinated alcoholic beverages, such as our products, appear to be targeted by some as unsafe."

Hunter said Phusion Products is saddened by the deaths in St. Petersburg and that stores that sell Phusion products to minors should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

"We have a vested interest - both personal and professional - in assuring the continued responsible consumption of our products," he said.

The Florida Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco Products conducted sting operations in stores in 2008 and 2009. Their "Operation Cocktail for Disaster" sting in 2008 found that one in four stores statewide sold alcohol-caffeinated drinks to minors.

"Our focus is to ensure our retailers are complying with underage drinking laws and not selling to someone who isn't of the correct age," said Alexis Lambert, a spokesperson for the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, which oversees the Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco Products.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has been studying the issue since last year, notifying 27 manufacturers in November that their drinks would be under scrutiny. FDA spokesman Michael

Herndon said no decision has been made, with 19 companies responding for their call for information.

"The FDA's decision regarding the regulatory status of caffeine added to various alcoholic beverages will be a high priority for the agency," Herndon said.

Dr. Preeti Jois, who works in the emergency room at Shands at the University of Florida, said she has not seen any patients come in suffering from the ill-effects of the drink, but she worries that might not be the case in coming weeks as students return to school and sororities and fraternities hold their annual rushes.

"I'm hoping it won't happen for the sake of our students," she said.

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