

# ALCOHOL CONCERN FACT SHEET

## ALCOPOPS

This factsheet looks at what alcopops are, why they are an important issue and how the drinks industry attempts to regulate itself and the sale of alcopops.

### Key points

- Alcopops have been around since the summer of 1995. Alcoholic lemonade was first sold in Australia, and quickly became popular in the UK
- Alcopops feed into an already increased drinking pattern among young people
- There has been an explosion of brands and types of drinks from alcoholic milkshakes to fizzy fruity mixes and buzz drinks that contain herbal stimulants
- Alcopops are the fastest growing drinks of all time. Market reports show that their sales tripled in 1995-1996. Sales figures are not available for 1997-2000.
- Research shows that young people find alcopops appealing, although the amount of young people drinking alcopops has fallen since 1996. 10% of young people now drink alcopops on a regular basis.
- Most of these drinks have an alcohol content of around 5% which is stronger than normal strength beers
- The voluntary code of practice relating to their marketing does not appear to be working

### What are alcopops?

Alcopops or 'designer drinks' include:

<b>FAB</b> (Flavoured Alcoholic Beverage)	term coined and favoured by The Portman Group to describe the whole category of 'new drinks', including spirits, sodas, ciders and beers
Alcoholic carbonate/soda	sweet fizzy drinks that contain alcohol e.g. Hoopers Hooch, Two Dogs, Jammin' also less sweet sodas
Designer drinks	stronger flavoured wines that were available before June 1995 eg MD 20/20, Thunderbird etc
Spirit mixers	spirit based drinks eg Moscow Mule, Metz & Volsk
Buzz drinks	drinks containing herbal stimulants e.g. Wild Brew & Ruby
Cider/beer mixers	cider and beer derivatives e.g. Diamond Zest & Snakebite
Strong white ciders	e.g. Diamond White, Shock
Dairy coolers/milkshakes	e.g. Moo & Supermilch
Frozen cocktails/slush	e.g. Spiked Ice, Frappe & Tony's Freezer Cocktails
Wine coolers	category into which most of the above alcopops fall for taxation/duty collection
Sachets	foil sachets of spirits e.g. Totpaks
Home brew 'booster' kits	Kits to turn ordinary pop into alcopop, can legally be sold to under 18s e.g. Splooch

**A quick formula for working out the number of units in a drink**

$$\frac{\text{alcohol by volume (\%)} \times \text{ml per container}}{1000}$$

eg 75 cl (750 ml) bottle of wine with an alcohol content of 12% abv contains 9 units

$$\frac{12 \times 750}{1000} = 9 \text{ units}$$

1000

**Some alcopops units and strengths**

<i>product</i>	<i>abv (%)</i>	<i>size</i>	<i>units</i>
Hooper's Hooch	4.7	330ml	1.6
Two Dogs	4	330ml	1.3
Shotts	5.3	330ml	1.7
Woodys	4.7	330ml	1.5
Mrs Puckers	5.5	275ml	1.5
Jammin'	5.5	330ml	1.8
Moo	5	340ml	1.7
MD 20/20	13.1	187ml	2.4
"	"	750ml	9.75
Thunderbird	13.1	187ml	2.4
Castaway	4.5	200ml	1

**Why are they so controversial? Why did alcopops attract so much attention?**

- Although the producers argue that they are aiming at the 18-25-year-old market there is little doubt that alcopops appeal to under 18s. The peak age for drinking alcopops is 13-16. It should be noticed that in 1996, 17% of alcohol consumed by young people were Alcopops but this had fallen to 10% in 1998 ( 1-ONS, 1999)
- Research has also shown that 'designer drinks' tend to be consumed in less controlled circumstances and can lead to greater loss of control and an increase in aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour. (2 - Hughes, K. et al 1997)
- Research carried out by the Health Education Authority has shown that "teenagers saw alcopops as being more appealing than traditional drinks - more refreshing, better tasting, less likely to taste of alcohol and trendier" (3- Health Education Authority 1997).
- Before alcopops were launched government research had shown that young people were starting to drink at an earlier age and that they were drinking more heavily ( 4- Goddard, 1996). It has not been established, however, if the new drinks encourage more young people to start to drink or existing drinkers to drink more, rather than simply influencing the beverage preferences of existing drinkers ( 5- Wright, 1999).
- An established control on young people's drinking has been that youngsters find traditional drinks unpalatable. With alcoholic lemonade, cola, flavoured milk etc, this control has been removed. Alcopops are also more likely to appeal to under 18's than traditional drinks because of their packaging and names. Typically this includes vibrant colours, rebellious or sexy names and cartoon characters.
- Young people have little experience of alcohol and little understanding of how it can damage developing bodies and affect behaviour.

### Key Research Findings

Research into young people's drinking shows that young people are drinking more in single sessions and are drinking more often.

#### Awareness

In relation to alcopops young people are very aware of all new drinks. The drinks that most young people are aware of are MD 20/20 and the leading brands of strong white cider (2- Hughes, K. et al 1997).

Young people are not aware of the alcoholic strength of alcopops. The less strongly alcoholic flavour appeals to them, but 63% of 15-16 year-olds wrongly believe they are less strong than beer or lager.

#### Attitudes

Research by the University of Glasgow found that the popularity of designer drinks peaks between the ages of 13 and 16. Attitudes towards these drinks vary with age, reflecting young people's motivation for drinking. This tends to mean that alcopops appeal less to the 16-17 age group as they are drinking to show their maturity and therefore drink spirits and bottled beer. Young people in the 14-15 age range drink alcopops because they are strong, cheap and sweet tasting (2- Hughes, K. et al 1997).

#### Images

*Alcopops*: "teenagers saw alcopops as being more appealing than traditional drinks - more refreshing, better tasting, less likely to taste of alcohol, trendier and suitable for teenage girls". In contrast beer/lager/cider was seen overwhelmingly as "a drink for lads/men" (6 – Health Education Authority, 1996).

*Fruit-flavoured wines*: seen as "getting you drunk quickly," "tasting good," "for drinking with friends at parties," and less likely to taste of alcohol than traditional wine (6 – Health Education Authority, 1996).

*Strong cider and lager*: strong cider is seen as something to drink with friends at parties; strong lager as a drink for lads and men (6 – Health Education Authority, 1996). Its cheapness is one reason for its popularity (7- Health Promotion Wales – 1997).

### The debate on alcopops and their marketing

- The drinks industry maintains that their products are aimed at young, but not underage drinkers and that they are clearly labelled as alcoholic and only available through licensed retailers (8 - Tate, M. 1995).
- The Portman Group issued its voluntary code on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks in April 1996 as a response to criticism of the growing alcopop market. The Portman Group is funded by the main drinks industry companies. The code covers the naming, packaging and merchandising of products.
- Despite the fact that it is a welcome acknowledgement by some sections of the drinks industry that it has a crucial role to play in promoting a safe and sensible approach to alcohol, products continue to be launched onto the market that can be challenged under the code.

Following repeated criticism by Alcohol Concern and others that the code was run by the industry for the industry, the Portman Group established an independent panel in January 1997.

- Whilst this is a step in the right direction Alcohol Concern believes it is in the interests of the alcohol industry to contribute to the establishment of a truly independent system of regulation.
- Any regulator of any industry must have a clear-cut role in order to be effective and credible. The Portman Group is confusing its roles by acting both as a defender of the drinks industry, frequently representing its interests in the media, while also acting as a watchdog.
- Alcohol Concern also believes that drinks trade needs to publicise more widely its code on the marketing of alcopops. Alcohol Concern has been the main source of complaints about this issue as others don't know how to register their complaints.

**Alcohol Concern believes that**

- alcopops should not be banned altogether, because of the difficulties in defining alcopops as a distinct group of drinks
- it is in the interests of the alcohol industry to contribute to the establishment of a truly independent system of regulation
- the introduction of alcopops has worsened what was already a serious situation in relation to young people's drinking
- attempts to address young people's drinking and its related harm should not simply focus on alcopops but on industry practices, education and licensing issues
- a product licensing system - backed up by legislation - could be considered

**Alcohol & Young People: the bigger picture:**

The packaging and promotion of alcohol and the ethics of the drinks industry cannot be considered in isolation. The issue of alcohol and young people needs a fully rounded approach.

The following should be considered:

- measures to make under-age purchase of alcohol more difficult
- tackling young people's attitude to alcohol
- services for young problem drinkers
- systems of support for the children of problem drinkers (they are most at risk of developing alcohol problems themselves)
- action on the links between alcohol and youth crime and homelessness
- setting a better example through the media and community action

**Alcopops – A history**

**1995**

Alcoholic Lemonades first sold in the UK. Hooper's Hooch (Bass) took only seven weeks from concept to launch and pipped Merrydown's Two Dogs onto the shelves by a couple of weeks. Two Dogs was the original (Australian) brand of alcoholic lemonade.

**1996**

Alcohol Concern publishes *Pop Fiction: the truth about alcopops*. This charts developments since then and summarises research findings.

Portman Group issues its voluntary code on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks as a response to criticism of the growing alcopop market. Alcohol Concern submits 21 complaints about 14 products which it believes contravene the Portman Group code.

First report on infringements of Portman Group code released. Alcohol Concern's complaints about four products are upheld. Seventeen other complaints about other products are rejected.

Surveys and reports into young people's drinking are carried out, many showing the popularity of alcopops among 15 to 17 year olds

Budget raises the price of alcopops by 21-22p on a 330ml bottle from January 1st 1997, bringing the average cost to £1.10. Alcohol Concern had sought a rise of 48p a bottle to put alcopops beyond the reach of most young people.

**1997**

Research into the impact of alcopops shows that they are popular among young people, especially the 12-17 age bracket

Portman Group publishes second report on infringements of its code of practice, upholding complaints against three products. It also announces plans to set up an independent panel to monitor their code. Alcohol Concern welcomes its establishment.

Zenith International market research published by Merrydown values the existing alcopops market at £370 million and predicts a doubling of sales by the end of the decade (a retail value of £750 million)

Sunday Times undercover investigation reveals disclosures by drinks company executives that alcopops are aimed at under 18s.

**1999**

Research into alcopops gives conflicting messages. Some research shows a decline in the popularity of alcopops among young people while other research shows that alcopops are still popular

The British Medical Association calls for drinks containers to be labelled with the number of units they contain and advice about sensible drinking. It is hoped that this may deter young people from drinking excessively.

**2000**

Complaints against three alcopops are upheld under the Portman Group code of practice. These drinks are all vodka-based drinks and the objections to them centre on their names, packaging and strength.

Statistics show that alcopops are declining in popularity amongst young people. Only 7% of young people had drunk alcopops compared with 14% in 1996. A further study shows that there was a fall in the consumption of alcopops by 16-24 year olds from 10% in 1997 to 6% in 1998.

The new White Paper on licensing reforms includes measures to change the legal age for drinking alcohol on licensed premises and buying it off to 18 and to introduce new offences of buying alcohol for a person under 18 and knowingly permitting a sale to a person under 18 years. People selling alcohol are also under an obligation to satisfy themselves about customers' ages. Alcohol Concern supports these measures.

**Sources**

- 1) Goddard, E & Higgins, V (1999) – Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among young teenagers in 1998, ONS.
- 2) Hughes, K. et al (1997) Young people, alcohol, and designer drinks: quantitative and qualitative study. *British Medical Journal*, vol. 314, 8 Feb, pp414-418
- 3) Health Education Authority (1997) *Young people and alcohol: a survey of attitudes and behaviour towards new types of alcoholic drinks in England*. London: HEA
- 4) Goddard, E (1996) *Teenage drinking in 1994*. London: OPCS
- 5) Wright, L (1999) – Young People and Alcohol: what 11-24 year olds know, think and do. Health Education Authority.
- 6) Health Education Authority (1996) *Young people and alcohol: a survey of attitudes and behaviour towards new types of alcoholic drinks in England*. London: HEA
- 7) Health Promotion Wales (1997) Welsh youth health survey, 1996
- 8) Tate, M. (1995) Lemonade with a twist of alcohol *The Observer 'Business'*, 4.6.95
- 9) The Portman Group (1996) *The Portman Group code of practice on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks, April 1996*.

**Other information available from Alcohol Concern:**

Pop Fiction: the truth about alcopops (April 1996)  
13 page report

Alcopops-research findings (June 1997)  
7 pages  
A summary of recent research on alcopops and young people's drinking behaviour

Young People's Drinking – factsheet (November 2000)  
7 pages  
An overview and summary of research surrounding young people's drinking

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