

Zero-alcohol beverages – harm-minimisation tool or gateway drink?

Tuesday 10 August 2021

Zero-alcohol beverages are becoming increasingly popular in Australia with major brands now stocked on supermarket shelves. Consumption of zero-alcohol products increased by 2.9 per cent in 2020 and is expected to increase by 31 per cent by 2024.

A new paper in the *Drug and Alcohol Review* by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) and The George Institute for Global Health (George Institute) raises questions about if these beverages are giving Australia's young people a taste for alcohol.

Menzies and George Institute researcher and lead author Mia Miller said that zero-alcohol beverages are often packaged identically to alcoholic beverages and can be indistinguishable in taste.

"The sale of zero-alcohol beverages in supermarkets means young people will be more frequently exposed to alcohol companies' branding and logos. Alcohol advertising exposure has been shown to increase early initiation of alcohol use, and increased alcohol use. It can also foster brand allegiance, a factor that has been shown to lead to increased chances of young people consuming alcohol," said Miller.

"There is currently not enough research to support the sale of zero-alcohol beverages in supermarkets. Children and young people may be buying these products from their local store, some of which do contain small amounts of alcohol. But more importantly, researchers do not yet know what impact consuming zero-alcohol beverages in childhood will have on subsequent alcohol use."

Miller says that further research is needed to assess whether the ease of availability of zero-alcohol beverages may lead to a gateway effect, where children who consume them would be more likely to consume alcoholic beverages underage.

"We have seen a significant decline in alcohol consumption amongst young people in Australia. We do not want to reverse these wins by having products available for sale to minors that taste and look like regular alcohol products," said Miller.

"The alcohol industry is frequently promoting zero-alcohol beverages as suitable for drinking while driving, while working out at the gym or even when pregnant. We do not know the potential impact on children if they see their parents drinking a zero-alcohol beer in the car as it is unlikely that they can distinguish between a zero-alcohol beer and a regular alcoholic one."

View the Zero-alcohol beverages: Harm-minimisation tool or gateway drink? Commentary here <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/dar.13359>.

ENDS

Media contact:

Paul Dale, communications manager

Phone: 0439 108 754 or (08) 8946 8658 | Email: communications@menzies.edu.au

Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses, Menzies continues to translate research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.