

**NEWS! NEWS! NEWS!**

## **Alcohol and Energy Drinks: The Dangers and Consequences of Usage and Implications for Camps**



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With the summer rapidly approaching, it is certainly time to think about our campers and what's in store for the summer of 2011. One of the most concerning issues facing our youth today is the increase in use of alcohol. Although this has always been a problem and camps have always had to deal with alcohol issues, there have been new twists and concerns regarding its usage in conjunction with a whole class of "energy drinks".

Alcohol consumed with energy drinks like Red Bull and Monster have gained recent popularity. These drinks are popular for the high content of caffeine used in order to stay awake or get a high. Teens in particular have been combining these drinks with alcohol to intensify their effect. The dangers of combining a stimulant and a depressant together have resulted in severe side effects which can in the extreme result in brain damage or be lethal. The combination of the two has been known to cause cardiac arrest in otherwise healthy users.

Even more recently, there is an increase in a new form of energy drinks that has raised red flags. These energy drink companies have capitalized on our youth and have created drinks that contain both caffeine and alcohol in them. They package them in bright colored, eye catching cans that attract the attention of youth. Energy drinks such as Four Loko and Joose have gained popularity among teens and children as young as elementary school. These drinks contain as much as 2-3 cups of caffeinated coffee and twice the amount of alcohol as a bottle of beer per can. These are potent, dangerous, yet legal drinks that are easily accessible in supermarkets, 7-Eleven or deli's across the nation. This one stop shopping without the necessary ID needed in a liquor store, in conjunction with its low price has resulted in an increase in purchase and usage. In essence, teens can get "drunker cheaper." Contrary to the belief that these drinks improve performance both academically and socially, results show quite the opposite. Lack of attention, an increase in hyperactivity and inappropriate aggression have been reported to be more the reality. A recent study reported in a local Long Island newspaper found that underage drinkers who combine alcohol with caffeine are more likely to suffer injury, be the victim of sexual assault, drive while intoxicated and require medical attention than those who consume caffeine free beverages.

It is amazing to think that these drinks have gotten by the FDA and proper regulation has not taken place. They have gotten by parents and the general public and by cashiers who don't ask for ID because they are unaware of the alcohol content. As of the new year, New York state has removed Four Loko and Joose from the market. Michigan and Oklahoma have already banned Four Loko while a number of other states have considered banning these drinks as well. These drinks have led to student hospitalizations across the country including 6 students at Ramapo College in N.J. , and 9 students at Central Washington University. Many colleges have now banned them and have begun to warn

students of their risks. With these alarming facts in mind, we need to consider what the implications for camp are.

Although certain drinks are being taken off the market, new energy drinks are being created that have already gotten FDA approval. It is safe to say that campers, counselors and other staff who have permission to go off camp grounds may have the opportunity to buy such drinks. The old familiar drinks like Red Bull and Monster still exist and are easily accessible. Parents provide their children with these drinks for an energy boost, not even realizing the potential risks. Parents have been known to send and bring these drinks up on visiting day. Camp owners work hard to prevent alcohol usage on and off camp during the summer. The reality exists however, and alcohol is sometimes discovered. There is serious risk of harm if alcohol is combined with these drinks.

Concerns were raised in my previous newsletter about prescription drug abuse and even more concerns exist in regards to mixing caffeinated alcohol drinks with these drugs. This is especially frightening since often parents do not share with camp owners and staff that their child is even taking these medications. Mixing prescription drugs and alcohol can lead to serious and fatal interactions including convulsions, liver damage, blood pressure elevation, loss of consciousness, nausea, sedation and dizziness.

Parents, staff and campers need to be made aware of these risks. They need to be educated on the severity of side effects which still remain unclear to most. It is a joint responsibility of the camp and the parents to assure that campers do not bring these drinks to camp and that parents do not provide them under any circumstances. Parents need to educate themselves and their children now about these dangerous drinks and follow up should be done for campers and staff both before and during the camp season. Just as universities are now being held liable for incidents occurring following consumption of these drinks while at college, camps face the same liability. Camp directors need to assure that there is a clear, written statement to parents, campers and staff not only about the dangers of usage but that there is zero tolerance of these drinks while at camp. Likewise, camps must strongly consider sending campers and counselors home who choose to violate this policy and ignore the seriousness of their usage.

The challenges of camping continue...

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