

'Spykes' Sparks Concern and Activism Over Kid-Friendly Mix of Alcohol and Energy Drinks

The recent controversy about Anheuser-Busch's "Spykes" energy drinks has prompted grassroots advocacy as well as broader concerns about mixing alcohol and energy drinks. Sold in pocket-sized bottles and containing 12 percent alcohol, Spykes is being marketed as an additive for beer and other alcoholic beverages. "Spykes is a great alternative to hard liquor shots," according to the Anheuser-Busch product website for Spykes. "A Spykes pour takes beer up a notch by adding a caffeinated rush and a sweet taste that finishes hot ... Spykes gives your beer a kick, adds flavor to your drink, and is perfect for a shot."

But critics see the product's bright packaging and fruity flavors -- Spicy Lime, Hot Chocolate, Spicy Mango, and Hot Melons -- as a blatant attempt to market the product to children. Hope Taft, former first lady of Ohio and a board member of the group Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free, dashed off a March 30 letter to Anheuser-Busch president and CEO

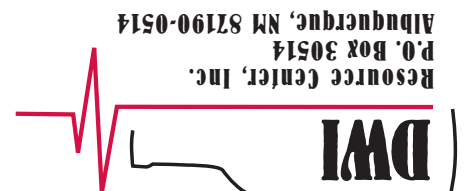
August Busch IV to protest Spykes' "appeal to those under the age of 21."

"With high-school prom season fast approaching, even your marketing suggests its appeal to underage kids by suggesting 'slipping it into a tiny purse or tuxedo jacket.' The vast majority of tux jackets are worn by high school students this time of year."

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The DWI Resource Center is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt New Mexico organization formed to reduce the social and economic impact of DWI in New Mexico through public awareness, education, prevention programs and research. The Center also provides assistance to victims and serves as a central clearinghouse for information on DWI and victims' rights.

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Call for Local Advocacy

Taft is not alone in her outcry. Community groups and coalitions around the country are protesting Spykes, include the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA), the Oregon Partnership, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

The brewer's response to the flap has hardly been conciliatory. Francine I. Katz, vice president of communications and consumer affairs for Anheuser-Busch, said Spykes is being marketed to "adult consumers" who are "looking for innovative alcohol beverages to match their active lifestyles" and attributed the criticism of Spykes to "perennial, fear-mongering anti-alcohol groups whose members are in the business of spreading misinformation."

She added: "Those who are concerned about the concealability of small containers should focus on those hard-liquor beverages [such as airline "mini-bottles"] already on the market that have three to four times greater concentration of alcohol by volume than Spykes."

The Oregon Partnership, a member of CADCA, was among the first groups to raise a red flag about Spykes, which hit store shelves in January. As a result of the Partnership's advocacy, beer distributors in Oregon agreed in February to stop selling Spykes. That victory helped generate widespread media coverage of the Spykes controversy as well as additional grassroots activity.

The Larger Problem: Alcohol and Energy Drinks

Critics say that beyond the issues of Spykes' kid-friendly packaging and marketing (the product website includes free Spykes instant-messenger icons and cellphone ringtones) lies the larger problem of mixing alcohol and energy drinks.

Despite an ingredient list that includes the stimulants caffeine, guarana, and ginseng -- all commonly found in energy drinks -- Anheuser-Busch's Katz said that Spykes "is neither a high-alcohol content drink, nor an energy drink," adding that each serving has about the same amount of alcohol as a third of a glass of wine and about as much caffeine as in an ounce of dark chocolate.

Concern about the danger of mixing energy drinks and alcohol is nothing new: as far back as 2001, researcher David Pearson of Ball State University's Human Performance Laboratory was warning that mixing the stimulants in

energy drinks with the depressant alcohol could lead to cardiopulmonary and cardiovascular health problems. Since then, a number of other energy drinks premixed with alcohol have hit the marketplace, including Anheuser-Busch's own Tilt, P.I.N.K. Vodka, Liquid Core, and Liquid Charge. Researchers expressed particular concern that those who mix alcohol and energy drinks could be more likely to drink and drive.

In the April 2006 issue of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, Brazilian researchers reported that people who combined alcohol and Red Bull tended to overlook the extent of their alcohol impairment because the energy drink made them feel so awake.

"Although combined ingestion decreases the sensation of tiredness and sleepiness, objective measures of motor coordination showed that it cannot reduce the harmful effects of alcohol on motor coordination," said researcher Maria Lucia O. Souza-Formigoni of the Federal University of Sao Paulo. "In other words, the person is drunk but does not feel as drunk as he really is. The second important point is that many users reported using energy drinks to reduce a not-so-pleasant taste of alcoholic beverages, which could dangerously increase the amount (as well as the speed of ingestion) of alcoholic beverages."

Did You Know?

- For every dollar they invest in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), employers generally save anywhere from \$5 to \$16. The average annual cost for an EAP ranges from \$12 to \$20 per employee (*US Department of Labor {USDL}, op.cit., p. 17*).
- 45% of full-time employees who were not self-employed had access to an EAP provided by their employers but within a single year only 1.5% used an EAP because of alcohol or other drug-related problems (*NIAAA, AHRW, op.cit., p. 121*).
- General Motors Corporation's EAP saves the company \$37 million per year -- \$3,700 for each of the 10,000 employees enrolled in the program (*ASIS OP Norton Information Resources Center, Substance Abuse: A Guide to Workplace Issues, 8/90, p. 23*).
- United Airlines estimates that it has a \$16.95 return for every dollar invested in employee assistance (*Ibid.*).