



Media Release

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Contaminated illicit alcohol being sold to unsuspecting customers at licensed bottle shops, study reveals

Australians may be drinking contaminated spirits without realising it, according to new research showing illicit alcohol being sold alongside legal products at bottle shops.

A preliminary investigation of licensed retailers in Melbourne revealed that illicit bottles of vodka are being sold – often at a cheaper price point than competitor products – in breach of food safety, liquor and tax regulations.

Chemical testing also showed the bottles contained methanol and plastic contaminants, said the team from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at UNSW Sydney and the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI) at Curtin University in Perth.

“Our results are concerning because it shows these products, with the outward appearance of a legal product, are being sold to unsuspecting customers,” said lead author Dr Michala Kowalski, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at NDARC.

“Ingestion of methanol at sufficient levels can be toxic and lead to symptoms ranging from vomiting and abdominal pain to blindness, coma and death.”

Dr Kowalski said typical indicators of illicit alcohol products, such as inexpensive labels and bottles, were not definitive in their own right and can be difficult to spot.

“People have very little to differentiate between cheap and potentially contaminated products when looking between bottles on a store shelf,” Dr Kowalski said.

“We have also been told by law enforcement and liquor regulators in several states that these products are increasingly being sold not just in bottle shops but at on-licensed venues like pubs, nightclubs and pubs.”

While the true size and reach of the illicit alcohol market is unclear, the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) recently estimated it to be worth at least \$767 million annually.

This is the equivalent of 14 million standard bottles of vodka, or more than 10% of all spirits consumed legally in Australia.

“Illicit alcohol can be sold much cheaper than legal products by dodging the excise duty, with higher profit margins,” said senior author and NDRI Research Fellow, Dr Nic Taylor.

“More importantly, this also has repercussions for public health, particularly among vulnerable drinkers, such as people on limited income. There is reason to believe they are more likely to consume illicit alcohol and be at increased risk of harm.”

As part of the study, the team visited four licenced bottle shops in high socioeconomic areas of Melbourne to get a sense of the immediate availability of illicit alcohol.

While this is a small sample, the researchers have since completed larger random audits of bottle shops across several states, which have confirmed the widespread availability of illicit alcohol.

In their first audit, they purchased three suspected illicit vodka products and a control product from a premium brand, with all four submitted for chemical analysis.

Each illicit product was the cheapest form of vodka by alcohol content sold by each visited retailer, and all had the appearance of poor-quality labelling and packaging.

For instance, one product had cheap but compliant labelling but without a barcode or resealable cap, while another had the price written in pen on plain paper and contained visible brown flakes in the bottle.

Chemical testing revealed that two products also contained methanol and plastic contaminants – likely the result of unsafe distillation, storage or bottling processes – neither of which are intended for human consumption.

“While the methanol detected was not at the concentration required to cause immediate vision loss or death, it was still in breach of Australian food standards, which raises further questions about the conditions they were produced in,” Dr Kowalski said.

“Ingestion of plasticisers at sufficient levels may also potentially cause negative long-term effects on the liver, kidneys and reproductive system.”

Release of the findings in *Drug and Alcohol Review* follows the two-day Illicit Alcohol Roundtable event co-hosted by NDARC and NDRI in February to address growing concerns about the emerging illicit alcohol market.

The event brought together the ATO, Australian Border Force, liquor and gaming authorities, health professionals, law enforcement, and researchers to understand the scale of the issue and discuss potential courses of action.

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Media contact: For all media enquiries, contact ndarc.media@unsw.edu.au or 0401 713 850

For reference: When reporting on drugs and alcohol, we encourage consultation of the Mindframe guidelines on [‘Communicating about alcohol and other drugs’](#) and [‘Communicating about suicide’](#), and the [‘Language Matters’](#) guide published by the NSW Users and AIDS Association.

We also encourage inclusion of the following helpline information in all reporting:

People can access free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs by calling the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on 1800 250 015.