

NON-ALCOHOLIC BEER

By: Jonathan Agley

THE PRODUCT

Non-alcoholic beer (often referred to as “near beer,” or by a specific brand name, such as “O’Doul’s”) is designed to look and taste exactly like traditional beer, though taste and quality vary greatly by product.

Indiana Code (IC) 7.1-1-3-5 requires breweries to ensure that any beverage labeled as “non-alcoholic” contains no more than .5% alcohol by volume (abv). This is usually accomplished through a heating or distillation process through which the beer is run after it has been brewed.

APPEARANCE

The alcohol-removal process is most often completed after the beer has been brewed. Non-alcoholic beers usually resemble traditional beers. Depending on the brand name and the brewery, non-alcoholic beers range from a light, golden yellow tint to a thick, dark brown color. As is the case with most beers, the color and thickness are representative of the ingredients used in composition, and are thus indicators of taste.

USERS AND PREVALENCE

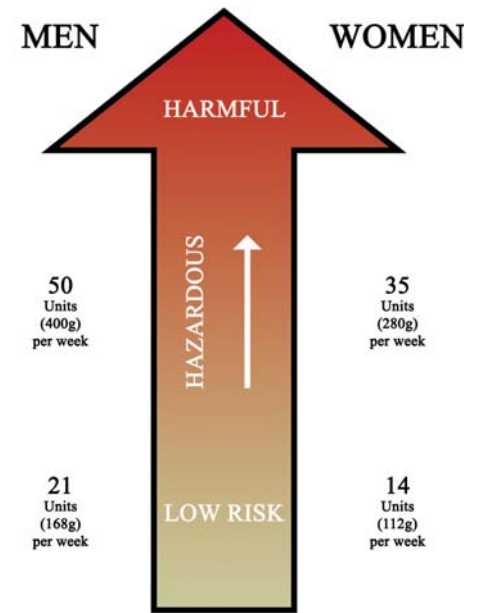
Because of the relatively low alcohol content of non-alcoholic beer, it is legal for minors (youth and young adults under the age of 21) to consume non-alcoholic beer in many states. Non-alcoholic beer is rarely considered to be a drug of abuse. A study published by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University showed that “about 13 percent of all visitors to 55 alcohol company web sites were under the legal drinking age of 21.” Among the web sites listed were www.budweiser.com and www.budlight.com, both of which are “affiliated with St. Louis beer giant Anheuser-Busch Cos. Inc.”

THE LAW

Laws preventing the sale or distribution of alcoholic beverages don’t address non-alcoholic beer, and any state wishing to regulate its sale needs to enact separate laws. Pennsylvania has enacted a uniquely progressive piece of legislation: The Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, Title 18, Chapter 63, state that it is illegal to furnish any “nonalcoholic beverage” (any beverage intended to be marketed or sold as nonalcoholic beer, wine or liquor having some alcohol content but does not contain more than 0.5% alcohol by volume),” to anyone under the age of 21. While many stores prohibit the sale of non-alcoholic beer to minors, this is done on a voluntary basis.

Under Indiana Law, anyone with a blood alcohol content (BAC) above .08% is considered to be intoxicated. According to lawyer John Roska of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, “a 150-pound person would apparently have to drink a whole case of non-alcoholic brew (24 bottles) in one hour to do that. But it wouldn’t necessarily take a lot... to produce something more than zero [on a breathalyzer test].”

It is illegal for a minor in Indiana to operate a motor vehicle with BAC higher than .02% under the Zero Tolerance provision. Thus, the individual in the example above would only have to drink six bottles of a non-alcoholic beverage within an hour to be legally vulnerable behind the wheel. Additionally, according to a report published by Indiana University, a standard glass of orange juice contains between .2% and .5% alcohol. Six glasses of orange juice could theoretically create the same culpability in a minor as six bottles of non-alcoholic beer.



For pregnant women either abstinence or no more than 1-2 units, once or twice weekly is recommended.

Source: The Medical Council on Alcohol (2003)

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

The department of Psychology at Indiana University published a brief study in 1990 that reports that, “Because non-alcoholic beer provides sensory cues that simulate alcoholic beer, this beverage may be more effective than other placebos in contributing to a credible manipulation of expectancy to receive alcohol.” In other words, because the taste and texture of non-alcoholic beers are so similar to those of alcoholic beers, they have the potential to psychologically alter drinkers’ expectations of the alcohol (or lack thereof) that they are imbibing.

PURPOSE AND THEORY

Educators and parents have long been concerned about the potential for non-alcoholic beers to act as “training beers,” or as drinks that normalize the consumption of alcohol through associations of taste, sight, and smell. Joseph Wells, MD, of the Maryvale Pediatric Clinic in Phoenix, AZ, maintains that, “[non-alcoholic beer] can be purchased by underage teenagers who want to mimic adult behavior... this allow[s] children and teens to practice [using alcohol].”

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According to Wells, “we must encourage parents not to purchase these products, as well as dissuade our teenage patients from the same.” He includes in his list of dangerous products non-alcoholic beer and all “fake” drugs (such as candy cigarettes).

Ultimately, the alcohol content of non-alcoholic beer isn't as significant as the drink's similarity to authentic beer. If the alcohol content were truly noteworthy, there would also be reports about the effects of “Orange Juice Overindulgence,” as the two drinks have comparable alcohol content. However, the placebo effect of non-alcoholic beer has attracted researchers' attention, as has the ability of “near beer” to normalize the sensory aspects of beer in preparation for future alcoholic indulgence. “In the November issue of the *Journal Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, a team of California scientists report that smell may be enough to trigger cravings and a subsequent relapse among certain alcoholics.”

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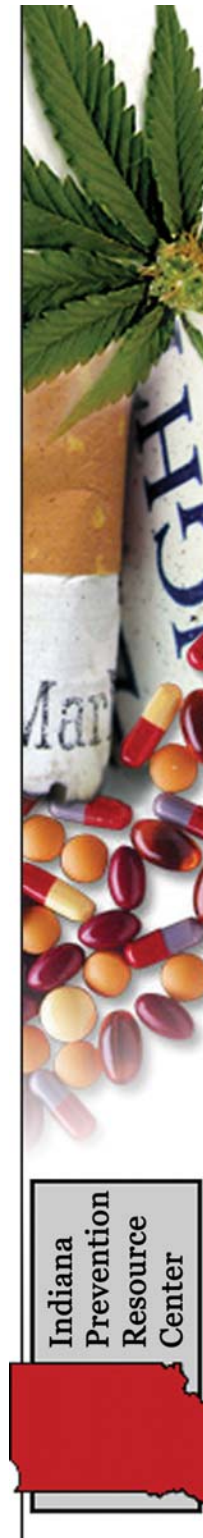
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