



September 2019 Newsletter

Why not prevent alcohol-related problems before a death occurs?

By Lise Gervais

Why not prevent problems before a death occurs? The role of alcohol in the death of 14 year-old Athéna Gervais, of Laval, Quebec, begs this question. The lax regulations and lack of enforcement that contributed to her death should not have existed.

In March, 2018, Athéna Gervais, drank almost 3 cans of a sugary, 11.9% alcohol, malt liquor product-- the amount of alcohol equivalent to 12 glasses of wine. She became disoriented and fell into a creek where she drowned. It's somewhat surprising that this product got to the marketplace at all; the brightly colored packaging, a name that promotes inebriation, and the sweetness of the drink seemed to be precisely targeted to young people. With a high alcohol content, a can containing several servings—which can't be resealed, encouraging quick consumption— would seem to raise some red flags. The low price point seems to be designed to attract price-sensitive youth and habitual drinkers. (The illustration is a theoretical example not an actual product.)

Although this happened in Canada, it is relevant in the US, as new high-alcohol, sweetened products that appeal to youth and heavy drinkers are coming onto the market all of the time. More limits on the serving size, alcohol and sugar content of these products could make them less dangerous.

After Athéna Gervais' drowning, the manufacturer removed the product from shelves in Quebec, but other similar products are still being sold in convenience stores, which are ubiquitous and open many hours of the week.

As incidents of alcohol poisoning among teens have increased in Canada in recent years, a number of common-sense recommendations have been made in an attempt to rein in how these products are made, sold, packaged and advertised.

Recommendations have been made by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Addiction (CCSA), the Quebec Coroner, and Éduc'alcool, a not-for-profit involved in education, information and prevention. Some recommendations have been acted upon. Recently it was announced that a 14% alcohol line of seltzers, sold in 24 ounce cans would be coming out soon in the US. The following recommendations could be helpful here as well.



Recommendations from these Canadian organizations included:

- **smaller serving size** - some of these products contain up to 4 servings in a can

that can't be re-sealed. In May, the Canadian government lowered the maximum number of servings per container to 1.5.

- **lower alcohol levels and less sugar** - With a sweetness level equivalent to 13 teaspoons of sugar, the alcohol may not be easy to taste, despite being up to 12% in some products. In June, Canada banned sugary drinks with more than 7% alcohol from being sold in convenience stores.
- **a minimum price for alcohol** – price-sensitive youth and heavy drinkers are attracted to lower prices for more alcohol
- **restricting access to sugary alcohol drinks**- because this product is made from malt liquor, it can legally be sold at convenience stores which have more locations and are open longer hours. If it were made from spirits, it would have to be sold where liquor is sold, in fewer locations and during fewer hours.
- **no names that glorify inebriation** – between January and November 2017, over 2,000 12-24 year-olds in Quebec were admitted to a hospital for acute alcohol poisoning-- an average of 7 every day. Deaths from alcohol poisoning in Canada have increased by 37% over the past 10 years from 210 in 2007, to 313 in 2014.
- **no marketing to young people** – regulation on marketing to youth should take into account online ads which can be narrowly targeted
- **no kid-targeted packaging** – sugary alcohol in packaging using bright colors and fonts that are meant to be attractive to teens are almost indistinguishable from sodas. Many countries have restrictions on packaging that might appeal to youth.

Athéna's father, Alain Gervais has been trying to get the word out that these products are

unsafe. In an interview following the release of the coroner's report he said, "The advertising is too strong for these products; the attractive colours make it seem like they're candy. They're not candy. They're dangerous."

On a personal note, this tragedy is especially unsettling. I share a last name with Athéna and her father Alain, and my family came from the same general area of Quebec. I was in Canada with my daughter in December and when we got to the hotel, I turned on the news. The first story was about Athéna Gervais. Being a parent of a teenager, I can only imagine the pain this has caused. Some changes have been made, but further common-sense regulation could help prevent this type of tragedy from happening again.

Sources:

Thank you to Catherine Paradis, Senior Research & Policy Analyst, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Addiction, for providing information on research, recommendations and regulations adopted.

"Beverages with a Combination of High Alcohol Content, Caffeine and Sugar", Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Addiction
https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HE_SA/Brief/BR9815398/external/CanadianCentreOnSubstanceUseAndAddiction-e.pdf

"Health Canada mandates lower alcohol content in sugary alcoholic drinks"
<https://globalnews.ca/news/5307472/health-canada-lower-alcohol-content-sugary-alcoholic-beverages/>

"Quebec tightening control on sales of high-alcohol mixed drinks"
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-malt-drinks-cab-fckd-up-saq-law-1.4573800>

"Laval teen's death attributed to sugary alcoholic drinks"
<https://globalnews.ca/video/5103995/laval-teens-death-attributed-to-sugary-alcoholic-drinks>

Report on Highly Sweetened Pre-Mixed Alcohol Beverages,
<https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/HESA/report-18/>