

Booze blitz: alcopop tax lifted by 70%

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FEDERAL taxes on pre-mixed alcoholic drinks were increased without warning at midnight last night by 70% under a Rudd Government plan to fund a new preventive health program and tackle binge-drinking among teenagers, particularly girls.

The tax hike — the first for the Labor Government — is expected to raise more than \$2 billion in extra revenue over the next four years.

A senior Government source last night confirmed that part of the windfall would be used to fund Australia's largest ever investment in preventive health, focusing on alcohol, smoking, diet and exercise. It is believed that the plan, to be known as the National Preventative Health Strategy, will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, with the amount to be finalised in the May 13 federal budget.

Under the tax increase, the level of excise charged on the increasingly popular pre-mixed drinks — also known as "alcopops" — has leapt from \$39.36 per litre of alcohol content to \$66.67.

It means alcopops are now taxed at the same rate as spirits, closing a loophole introduced with the GST in 2000 whereby the excise is lower when the product is purchased pre-mixed than when it is mixed fresh.

Drink prices will increase by between 30 cents and \$1.30 a bottle, depending on the level of alcohol.

The move comes as figures reveal alarmingly high levels of consumption of the popular mixes among teenage girls.

Although alcohol consumption is declining across all age groups, teenage girls are at a far higher risk from binge drinking than their male peers, according to a new government study.

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, compiled by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, shows that despite a slight drop in the rate of teenage girls' alcohol abuse, they are still more susceptible to harm from alcohol than teenage boys.

The proportion of teenage girls putting themselves at risk of short-term alcohol-related harm at least monthly was 28.3%, down 1% from the most previous survey, published four years ago. The number of teenage boys putting themselves at risk dropped from 26% to 24.5%.

Girls aged 12 to 15 are now more than three times as likely as teenage boys of the same age to consume alcohol at least once a week. The survey found that 10.6% of teenage girls and 7% of teenage boys are drinking at levels regarded as having harmful long-term health effects (at least 15 standard drinks a week for females and 29 for males).

Professor Ian Webster, chair of the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation, said the number of young people putting themselves at risk of alcohol-related harm was "troubling" given the impact of alcohol on brain development.

Separate figures from the Bureau of Statistics reveal consumption of pre-mixed alcoholic drinks has leapt by 15% in the past year. The figures show that 60% of female drinkers aged between 15 and 17 reported drinking a pre-mixed drink, compared to 14% in 2000, suggesting the sweet and fizzy mixes are increasingly introducing young people to alcohol.

The foundation survey also underlines the rise of alcohol-related violence, with more than a quarter of respondents having been verbally abused by someone under the influence of alcohol, and almost one in 20 having been physically abused by a drunk person.

The survey of 23,000 people found the proportion of the general population drinking alcohol daily fell slightly and the number of people abstaining from alcohol climbed from 9.3% to 10.1%.

The alcohol industry seized on the survey to suggest that alcohol abuse was not getting worse. Stephen Riden, spokesman for the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia, which represents alcohol manufacturers, said the study showed Australians were moderating their alcohol consumption.

"We do have too many people who abuse alcohol, but the problem is not worsening as many people would believe," he said.

But David Templeman, the chief executive of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia, said he feared the survey had underestimated the scale of the alcohol problem. "Things are improving, but there's a hell of a lot more to be done," he said. "This is long-term stuff, big cultural changes must take place and that won't happen overnight, it will take 10 years."

In other findings, the proportion of the population who had used any illicit drug in the previous 12 months dropped to just over 13%, down from 15.3% in the 2004 survey.

Source: The Age