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Melbourne Bottle Shops Sold Illicit Vodka, Study Finds

Researchers said some bottles contained methanol and plastic contaminants, raising fears that shoppers bought unsafe alcohol unknowingly.

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A new study from researchers in Australia says some licensed bottle shops in Melbourne have been selling illicit vodka alongside legal products, raising concerns that shoppers may be buying contaminated alcohol without knowing it.

The preliminary investigation, led by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at UNSW Sydney and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University, found bottles that appeared to be low-cost vodka products on shelves in licensed retailers. Chemical testing showed that two of the products contained methanol and plastic contaminants, substances that are not meant for human consumption.

The researchers said the bottles were sold in ways that made them look like ordinary retail products. In some cases, the labeling was poor or incomplete. One bottle had no barcode or resealable cap. Another had a price written in pen on plain paper and visible brown flakes inside. The team said these signs were not always enough for customers to identify the products as illicit.

“Our results are concerning because it shows these products, with the outward appearance of a legal product, are being sold to unsuspecting customers,” said Dr. Michala Kowalski, a postdoctoral research fellow at NDARC and the study’s lead author.

The study said methanol can be dangerous even at relatively low levels. In higher doses, it can cause vomiting, abdominal pain, blindness, coma and death. The amount found in the tested bottles was not high enough to cause immediate vision loss or death, but it still violated Australian food standards, according to the researchers.

The team also found plastic contaminants, which they said may have come from unsafe distillation, storage or bottling. Dr. Kowalski said exposure to plasticizers at sufficient levels could have long-term effects on the liver, kidneys and reproductive system.

Researchers visited four licensed bottle shops in higher-income areas of Melbourne to assess how easy it was to find illicit alcohol. They later carried out larger random audits across several states and said those checks confirmed that illicit alcohol was widely available.

The study comes as Australian authorities try to measure the size of the illicit alcohol market. The Australian Taxation Office has estimated it is worth at least A$767 million a year, equal to about 14 million standard bottles of vodka and more than 10% of all spirits consumed legally in Australia.

Dr. Nic Taylor, a senior author of the study and a research fellow at NDRI, said illicit alcohol can be sold much more cheaply than legal products because sellers avoid excise duty. He said that creates higher profit margins and can also put vulnerable drinkers at greater risk.

“There is reason to believe they are more likely to consume illicit alcohol and be at increased risk of harm,” he said.

The researchers said law enforcement and liquor regulators in several states have told them these products are increasingly being sold not only in bottle shops but also in licensed venues such as pubs and nightclubs.

The findings were published in Drug and Alcohol Review after a two-day Illicit Alcohol Roundtable held in February by NDARC and NDRI. The meeting brought together officials from the ATO, Australian Border Force, liquor and gaming regulators, health professionals, law enforcement officers and researchers to discuss the scale of the problem and possible responses.