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Over 90 hospitalized, 38 dead in Istanbul's alcohol poisoning outbreak

Authorities enforce new measures to combat counterfeit alcohol sales in Turkey’s largest city.

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The city of Istanbul, Turkey's largest metropolis, is facing a serious issue related to the consumption of alcohol adulterated with methanol, which has led to over 90 hospitalizations since the beginning of the year. As of last week, at least 38 people have died, and 26 remain in intensive care units due to this outbreak, which authorities attribute to the consumption of illegal alcoholic beverages.

On January 16, the governor of Istanbul issued a statement announcing additional measures to combat the sale of counterfeit and illegal alcohol. Among the newly implemented regulations is a requirement for establishments selling alcohol to install high-definition surveillance cameras that record continuously, 24 hours a day. These recordings must be kept for at least 30 days. Businesses that fail to comply with these measures risk losing their operating licenses.

The most commonly counterfeited drink in Turkey is raki, an anise-flavored spirit traditionally distilled from grape pomace. The use of methanol, a highly toxic form of alcohol, as a substitute or adulterant in these beverages poses a lethal risk to consumers.

Since the beginning of the year, authorities have revoked the licenses of 64 businesses for selling counterfeit or contraband alcohol and have confiscated 29 tons of illicit beverages. Police have arrested 15 suspects accused of distributing large quantities of adulterated alcohol. Four of them have been charged with deliberate homicide, while legal proceedings against eight others are ongoing. Three were released.

Such measures are not new. In December 2024, authorities reported that 77 people had been poisoned, and 37 had died in Istanbul since early November. During the same period, more than 1,000 establishments were inspected, and 287,758 liters of illegal alcohol were seized.

Some experts believe that the problem of counterfeit alcohol in Turkey is partly driven by the high taxes on alcoholic beverages, which have risen significantly under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Since 2010, the tax on raki has increased by 2,500%, prompting many individuals to seek cheaper but dangerous alternatives on the black market.

This issue is not unique to Turkey. In Laos late last year, similar cases of methanol poisoning were reported, leaving at least six international tourists dead, including two 19-year-olds. The consumption of methanol-tainted beverages remains a persistent threat, particularly in contexts where access to regulated alcohol is restricted or prohibitively expensive.