



Poland bans energy drinks for under 18s

The ban has been welcomed by physicians, who have seen the adverse health effects. Ed Holt reports.



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Polish doctors have welcomed plans to ban the sale of energy drinks to minors amid what they say is a worrying ignorance of the risks to children from overconsumption.

Under legislation introduced into parliament on Feb 8, by Sport and Tourism Minister Kamil Bortniczuk, marketing and sales of all energy drinks to anyone younger than age 18 years would be banned from 2024. Doctors immediately welcomed the move, pointing to mounting evidence of the harmful effects of such drinks and their increased consumption and availability.

“20 years ago there was just one type of energy drink on sale here, it was in a small, 250 mL can, it was expensive, and you could only get it in a few places. Now there are shelves full of different energy drinks in shops everywhere in different sizes, with different tastes and different content”, said Agnieszka Zachurzok, Assistant Professor at the Department of Paediatrics at the Medical University of Silesia. “They have a lot of sugar, caffeine and taurine and children are consuming an awful lot of these drinks without being aware of what is in them. Now is a good time to ban them”, she told *The Lancet*.

Energy drinks usually combine amino acids with high concentrations of caffeine and sugar or sweeteners. They are popular among children—one study suggests that up to half of children worldwide drink them weekly or monthly. But medical groups in many countries have warned of growing evidence of risks to young people associated with their consumption.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which has previously called for a ban in Britain on energy drink sales to those younger than 16 years, has highlighted evidence of

links between their consumption by young people and higher rates of risk-seeking behaviours such as smoking; alcohol and other substance use; poor mental health; adverse cardiovascular effects; headaches; stomach aches; hyperactivity; and insomnia.

Doctors in Poland say they have seen rising cases of such conditions among young people due to energy drink consumption. “The problem is growing. My department has seen more and more children coming in with conditions related to energy drink consumption, such as insomnia, dehydration, and even symptoms of depression”, Prof Artur Mazur, Head of Paediatrics at Clinical Hospital no.2 in Rzeszow and Vice-President of the Polish Paediatric Society, told *The Lancet*.

Mental health-care professionals in the country have pointed to anecdotal evidence of growing numbers of children addicted to energy drinks. Prof Piotr Galecki, National Consultant for Psychiatry and specialist psychiatrist at the Medical University in Lodz, told *The Lancet*: “The psychiatric community in Poland believes that the effects of energy drinks on children’s health may be harmful. We do not have detailed studies, but clinical observations are disturbing.”

“Colleagues working with children and adolescents have many patients with energy drink abuse problems. This is a complex problem that nurtures many [other] problems in adolescence. Any physiological over-stimulation during personality development can have unpredictable effects”, he added.

The drinks remain popular among young Poles. Earlier this month, Poland’s Deputy Health Minister, Waldemar Kraska, citing an as yet unpublished analysis, claimed that almost half of 15-year-olds consume

them once a week. Furthermore, research released last year showed that two-thirds of Polish adolescents aged 13–19 years consumed energy drinks.

However, the authors of that study say that there is a general lack of awareness or interest among young people about the potential risks of the drinks. “What we found during our research is that adolescents are not interested in the long-term effects of bad diet, for example of developing type-2 diabetes and so on. So, what we should do is focus on educating them about other potential effects—for instance, skin problems such as acne, or obesity from high consumption of the added sugars in energy drinks—as these are connected with their appearance, which is very important in adolescence”, Katarzyna Zylka, a researcher at the Gdansk College of Health, told *The Lancet*.

But it is not just young people that need to be better informed on the issue, doctors told *The Lancet*. Mazur said awareness of the risks of energy drinks among physicians and paediatricians was low, while Zachurzok warned that parents were also often poorly educated on their potential health effects.

Other experts pointed out that a ban itself could have an important effect on parents at least. Bahee Van de Bor, spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association, which has supported proposals in the UK for a ban on the sale of energy drinks to minors, told *The Lancet*: “Introducing a ban on the sale of these drinks could make parents especially sit up and take notice, and become more aware of the risks associated with the drinks their children are consuming.”

Ed Holt

For the study on global consumption by children see <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/2/e047746?rss=1>

For the statement by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health see <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/ending-sale-energy-drinks-children-consultation-response>

For more on the analysis cited by Kraska see <https://www.medonet.pl/zdrowie,polskie-dzieci-pija-energetyki-napotege--uda-sie-ich-zakazac--kraska--analizujemy,artykul,28487088.html#kraska-po-napojeh-energetyzyjace-siega-prawie-polowa-15-latkow>

For the study on consumption among Polish adolescents see <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36583322/>