

Below: bottles of vodka-looking aftershave on sale in Russia  
Right: the bleak streets of Izhevsk

# Aftershave alcoholism

Russians on the breadline are risking death by drinking aftershave and cleaning agents instead of vodka. **Susannah Tomkins** on a sinister side of alcohol abuse which is affecting more than one million people in Russia.



It may come as no surprise that Russians are heavy drinkers: for many, Russian culture is synonymous with vodka. The majority of the country's 142 million population do indeed regularly drink beer, wine and spirits. However, more worrying is the emergence of a sizeable chunk of Russian society that chooses to imbibe 'surrogate' alcohol such as aftershaves and tinctures.

In Russia, surrogate alcohols are bought with the weekly groceries, or can be a staple refreshment at parties. They are sold in pharmacies and kiosks on street corners, as well as in supermarkets and grocery shops. It's not uncommon to overhear couples travelling home on the bus debating which flavour aftershave or tincture they would prefer to buy that evening.

Although they are drunk by many Russians, and they are indeed alcoholic, surrogate alcohols are not actually drinks. Instead this word describes a group of highly alcoholic and widely consumed substances such as eau de cologne, nastoikas (tinctures, flavoured with essence of hawthorn or red pepper to name just two) and alcohol-containing medicines. Surrogates are manufactured substances, as opposed to alcoholic home-brew (samogon). Whilst surrogates are ostensibly sold for medicinal or cleaning purposes, they are seldom used in that way. Instead, surrogates are considered a viable choice of drink.

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In the first study of its kind, scientists investigating surrogate consumption in Russia estimate that seven per cent of working age men in Izhevsk, in the Western Ural region, drink surrogates, with two per cent drinking them weekly, and a further two per cent daily. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women also consume surrogates, but at a much lower level.

Izhevsk is a medium-sized industrial town (population 650,000) located approximately 1000km east of Moscow. It has a short hot summer and a very long, cold winter with temperatures reaching -25°C and lower. Each spring when the temperature begins to rise and the city workers begin chipping away at the compacted ice which has covered the pavements for months, the ground beneath emerges, revealing roads devoid of markings (worn away by the severe weather and repainted each year) along with a few unidentified corpses.

There is nothing unique about life in Izhevsk compared with so much of Russia. There is nothing unique about death in Izhevsk either – it has similar mortality rates to those found throughout Russia, and those rates are disturbingly high. Accordingly, life expectancy in Russia has been low over the past few decades, currently at around 58 years for Russian men and 72 for women (compared with 77 for men and 82 for women in the UK today).

One factor emerges as a particularly potent influence on Russia's mortality crisis: hazardous patterns of alcohol consumption, with surrogates playing an important role in the high mortality rates. Those most affected are men in middle age, around 25-55 years old – the working age population. The long-term implications of this are serious.



Surrogates are not necessarily impure. They are actually excellent sources of cheap ethanol, the alcohol that humans can drink, as opposed to methanol. From an analysis carried out of products available in pharmacies and kiosks in Izhevsk last year, we know that vodka contained, on average, 44 per cent ethanol, with no other alcohols detected. In contrast, non-medicinal surrogate spirits contained, on average, 94 per cent ethanol. We estimate that consumption of surrogate alcohols alone is responsible for up to 40 per cent of premature deaths among men in Russia today.

The way in which surrogates cause harm to the body is currently unresolved. Surrogates are unregulated, so the possibility of ingesting impure substances is real, and there have been some reported incidents in which people have died from toxins after drinking surrogates: there was a reported outbreak of toxic hepatitis in Russia in 2006 which was largely attributed to people drinking poor quality alcohols. However, scientific research indicates that these are unlucky exceptions and most surrogates are actually quite pure. Evidence to date strongly suggests that it is simply the very high level of ethanol which allows people to get drunk quickly and cheaply, accelerating the cumulative damage to cardiovascular systems leading to chronic morbidity and eventually, or suddenly, death. In addition, binge drinking is associated with an increased risk of thrombosis, which can lead to sudden death from a heart attack or other causes.

Since surrogates are so strong, it is prudent to dilute them before drinking. This is usual, although water is not always used – more often than not other drinks are used including alcoholic drinks which are, after all, weaker – beer being a lowly 6 per cent ethanol by volume. However, once already tipsy, surrogate drinkers can either forget or not bother to dilute surrogates despite the known risks of immediate damage and pain.

Unfortunately for them, the percentage alcohol in the stronger surrogates means they cannot be drunk straight without immediate physical damage to the throat. Luckily, techniques have evolved to drink them more 'safely'. A popular method to avoid singeing the trachea is to breathe in, then swallow neat surrogates, then hold breath for 10 seconds before breathing out to expel any residual fumes.

In the years since 1991, the fall of communism and the end of the USSR, Russia has struggled to make the transition from a communist, supposedly egalitarian society in which everyone had the right to a home and a job – and hence security and income – to a free market economy. The Russian people were ill-equipped to cope with this transition and

compete in the free market, and many lacked the basic skills required to keep a job once it was no longer guaranteed regardless of performance. The last few decades have been a time of political and social and economic transition, and it has not been a smooth one.

The reasons for drinking alcohol in Russia may be complex, but are not mysterious: life is hard, and alcohol is an easy and culturally acceptable method of escapism. But why surrogates? The answer may be that surrogates are cheap: about 15 Roubles (30p) for a 100ml bottle. Since surrogates are not official beverages, they escape taxation and are therefore a far cheaper source of alcohol than beer, wine or spirits: they work out at approximately a sixth of the price per gram of ethanol compared with commercially produced vodka. This must certainly add to their appeal. Despite their attractive packaging, whereby bottles actually mimic vodka bottles, these substances certainly do not taste nice. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the decision to drink surrogates is often an economic one. The more a person drinks heavily, the more likely they are to lose their job, and the more likely they will be to use surrogates.

Little has yet been done to address the social causes of the hazardous drinking that is so widespread in Russia today, despite a heightened awareness of the problem, especially since President Vladimir Putin's State of the Nation speeches in 2005 and 2006, where the mortality crisis and the problem of surrogates were given strong emphasis.

Small but firm steps are being taken to address the sale and availability of alcohol in Russia. The Duma recently decided to control the sales of goods containing more than 1.5 per cent alcohol, and legislative changes affecting the sale of surrogates are apparently imminent. Most heartening, official statistics on life expectancy show that after a long period of decline punctuated with dramatic fluctuations, there is finally a reversal which began tentatively in 2005, and appeared to be persisting fairly convincingly in 2006. Life expectancy in Russia is finally improving.

However, it is too early to get excited. Although Izhevsk is now beginning to turn a corner and show signs of prosperity, progress feels slow and many still look back to communist days as those of a golden era. "Life is struggle", a Russian colleague told me, as we tried to pick our way over slushy ice and potholes under an overcast sky in -15°C Izhevsk. I had to agree.

While Izhevsk and Russia as a whole are slowly beginning to show signs of prosperity, progress is slow. Inequalities remain high and life remains tough for the majority of Russians. It is possible that as Russia moves through this transitional period, life will slowly improve and the desperate behaviour of drinking surrogates will diminish. However, this is far from certain. We shall have to wait and see.

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## MOONSHINE: A GLOBAL MARKET

Alongside the surrogate alcohol featured in the Russian study, there also exists an extensive global market in the brewing and consumption of illicit alcohol, better known as 'moonshine'.

According to the book *Moonshine Markets*, it is estimated that moonshine – non-commercial, illicit, illegal or unrecorded alcohol – may account for as much as 50 per cent of total alcohol consumption worldwide. Yet this area of alcohol studies has been largely neglected in the research community, due, in part, to the difficulty in collecting data for a product that is largely illegal.

## Home brew in Kenya – refugee camp-style

The town of Kakuma is located in the Turkana district, in the north-western region of Kenya. The Kakuma Refugee Camp was established in 1992 after the arrival of 12,000 young refugees from Sudan.

In September 2006, I served as a consultant in a joint UN and World Health Organisation (WHO) rapid assessment project, which focused on substance use and HIV vulnerability at the camp. Its main population at assessment time was close to 100,000, with the majority coming from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

Nearly three quarters were aged under 26, while about 60 per cent were males. Like in most refugee camps, unemployment was rife, while refugees faced a myriad of problems including poverty, violence, insecurity and lack of essential daily needs.

Our research found that the brewing and consumption of traditional alcoholic or 'moonshine' drinks namely *busaa* and *kaada* (fermented from sorghum and yeast) and *chang'aa* (the distilled form) was widespread in the camp. *Khat* use was reported mainly among the Somalis, while limited use of cannabis and benzodiazepines was reported. Use and injecting of cocaine and heroin was only suspected to occur among very few refugees.

In Kenya, *chang'aa* brewing is illegal, while production and sale of the fermented drinks is only permissible upon obtaining a licence. Brewing, sale and consumption of moonshine drinks was found to have strong links to the economic, cultural, social and psychological life of the refugees.

Brewing constitutes the main means of livelihood of many women. Most of the women brewers also engage in sex work and unsafe sex, making HIV transmission a concern. Other alcohol-related harms identified include diarrhoea (from unhygienic brewing methods), organ system damage, trauma, gender-based violence, domestic violence, abnormal behaviour, depression and suicides, child abuse and neglect, diversion of food and other family resource and unemployment.

Alcohol use intervention was limited to periodic police raids involving the destruction of the brewing equipment and prosecution of arrested brewers, a measure described as generally ineffective. General health, HIV and social services were available but did not integrate specific alcohol harm reduction measures.

The UN and WHO, working in partnership with service agencies in the camp, have embarked on an action plan which includes the training of health and community workers on screening and brief interventions, incorporating substance use issues into existing HIV and life skills programmes, access to affordable and effective treatment and rehabilitation and the inclusion of brewers in alternative income generation programmes.

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