

ALCOHOL



Controversy in a can

The drinks industry denies products such as Carlsberg Special Brew encourages 'irresponsible' drinking. But, says Sam Hart, those working with the most vociferous customers of super-strength lagers tell a different story

'Best shared well chilled', reads the label on the lager can. It may sound tempting – but this could be more of a warning to take it easy than a serving suggestion. The label belongs to Carlsberg Special Brew and drinking a whole can would involve consuming 4.5 units of alcohol – above the recommended daily allowance of four units for men and three units for women.

The drink is among four super-strength lagers currently on sale in the UK – all offering over the safe daily limit of alcohol in just one 500ml can. This autumn will see a renewed crusade to get these nine per cent alcohol lagers removed from the shelves.

Homeless charity Thames Reach, the driving force behind the campaign, claims the lagers are ruining already damaged lives and are calling on major supermarkets to remove the drinks from their shelves. The call follows successful moves by

the London boroughs of Westminster and Ealing, which earlier this year persuaded the major chains to remove super-strength lager from their shops and have seen a resultant drop in anti-social behaviour.

This summer the charity protested to the independent complaints panel of the Portman Group – the drink industry's self-regulatory body – that Kestrel Super, Skol Super, Tennent's Super and Carlsberg Special Brew "encouraged irresponsible drinking".

In June the Portman Group denied this, saying that government alcohol limits were guidelines, rather than strict thresholds. They likened the consumption of super-strengths to drinking wine, because both "contain a high number of units and are not easily re-sealable".

The comparison has been met with derision by some anti-super-strength campaigners. "I can't see how anyone can

reasonably compare wine - which has been used in a convivial manner for centuries - with an obnoxious chemical concoction like super-strength lager," said *Big Issue* founder and former rough sleeper John Bird. "It's quite clear that the very vulnerable are considerably more likely to drink this mad modern mixture and that its production is a means of profiting from those who are sorely in need of our help."

Kestrel Super was, however, found to be in breach of the Portman Group's own code of conduct which prevents any encouragement of 'binge-drinking, irresponsible or immoderate consumption.' The panel found that the strength of the lager was the dominant theme in its marketing and was reinforced by the 'stern image of a Kestrel'.

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"As far as our clients are concerned, super-strength drinks are as big a killer as heroin, but more widely available," says Mike Nicholas from Thames Reach. "One former drinker and heroin user I know called Marion found it more difficult to get off the drink than off heroin. Every time she went to her corner shop the super-strength drinks were in her face at the front of the display, whereas heroin involved the hassle of phoning a dealer and meeting a runner. At £1 a can rather than £10 a wrap, the super-strength drinks are cheaper too."

One in five of the 4,000 homeless people Thames Reach helps in London each year has a serious addiction to super-strength lagers. Historically, those who drank and those who took drugs kept to themselves, with each group harbouring a mistrust for the other. But the boundaries have become blurred in recent years with people using both heroin and super-strength lagers.

"There is no doubt that the super-strength lagers are used like illegal drugs - they are used to get off your head," says Thames Reach Chief Executive Jeremy Swain. "Some of the rituals surrounding these drinks are redolent of illegal drug-taking. One drinker described how he sucked the drink from a small hole in the base of the can to reduce the bubbles - believing that this gave him a direct hit of alcohol to the brain."

Moreover, it is claimed the lagers are costing lives: "We see people dying in their 40s from liver damage from heavy drinking - wiping 20 or so years off their lives," says Swain. "In an ideal world we would like to see these harmful products banned."

But while the drinks industry accepts that people may use the drinks to blot out painful lives, they say that it is simplistic to put all the blame on the strength of the lager. They claim that individual responsibility and education is key to sensible drinking. "Getting rid of super-strength lagers would not get rid of the root cause," says the Portman Group's Michael Thompson.

Not all charities dealing with street drinkers are convinced that removing or taxing super-strengths from the shelves would make a difference. "I can't see what it would do," says Mike Linnell, Communications Director of drugs agency Lifeline. "If people are serious about getting off their heads they will get hold of cheap, strong alcohol somehow."

Swain concedes that many drinkers would turn to strong cider instead, but says that any moves towards weaker drinks would be welcome. Lessons from abroad show that drinking habits can be influenced by taxation. A move by the Australian government increased the tax on high alcohol lagers whilst decreasing it on weaker drinks - an approach which campaigners believe could be replicated here.

But this year's budget passed up the chance to tax higher strength lagers and opted for an increased tax on alcohol overall. Confusion over this issue between the Treasury and the Department of Health seems likely to hamper progress. A letter from the Treasury to Thames Reach states that "an increase in price of a specific alcoholic drink... is not effective at decreasing harmful alcoholic consumption." However, a letter from the Department of Health said: "The Department is aware... that increasing prices of alcohol through the tax system can, at least in the short term, reduce consumption levels."

"It would be extremely helpful if the government could make up its mind on this crucial issue," says Swain. "We are convinced that increasing the price of strong lagers and decreasing the price of weaker lagers will lead to people moving off of the super-strengths and that lives will be saved."

Thames Reach has shown that with intensive support and using harm reduction methods associated with illegal drugs, even the most hardened addicts can be weaned away from super-strengths - with encouraging results.

Former rough sleeper, Ian Davison, 43, would regularly drink seven to eight cans of super-strength lager a day - around eight times his recommended daily alcohol limit.

"Like many other former street drinkers, his movements displayed the familiar shuffling of the feet symptomatic of the brain damage caused by too much alcohol," says Nicholas. "Just getting to the shops presented him with difficulties. But Ian swapped his cans of super-strength lager for cans of Irish stout. By cutting back the amount he drank and by switching drinks, he massively decreased the amount of alcohol his body was taking in. He knows he'll never be the same as before alcoholism took hold, but he's out and about now and no longer a virtual prisoner in his own flat."

Campaigners are stepping up parliamentary pressure this Autumn with ministerial briefings and calls from Labour MP Martin Linton for an adjournment debate.

But frontline workers say that for many drinkers, time is ruining out: "One client of mine, a formerly fit, able man, is now barely six stone," says Nicholas "Others, some only in their thirties, just didn't pull through. Something needs to be done to ensure future generations of youngsters don't fall into the same trap."

■ Sam Hart is a freelance journalist



Thames Reach hostel resident Theresa Grimes has used super-strength lager to help her through 12 years of living rough on the streets of London. She still drinks eight to ten cans of super-strength lager a day - more than the recommended alcohol limit for a week. Aged 43, her mobility is similar to someone past retirement age, and she finds it difficult getting to the toilet. She is unable to cook, rarely washes and doesn't understand how to tidy her own room.