Clemson Students Find Bacteria Risk in Beer Pong

April 15, 2013 | Category: More headlines, News

by Jeffrey Collins, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The most dangerous part of playing beer pong might not be drinking too much beer.

A group of Clemson University students tested ping-pong balls being used in beer pong games across campus one weekend last fall and discovered that they were teeming with bacteria. More research found that dangerous bacteria such as salmonella, listeria, e. Coli and staph on the balls end up in the beer when players make successful tosses into glasses.

The research is part of Clemson's Creative Inquiry program, in which students pose common-sense scientific questions, then plan research to find the answers. Previous classes have debunked the five-second rule that food is safe to eat, as long as it is quickly picked up after falling on the floor, and shown that double-dipping chips can pose a health hazard.

The goal is to get students to think about the steps needed to scientifically research these types of questions, said food science professor Paul Dawson.

“It’s a learning experience, but I try to make it interesting and fun,” Dawson said.

In most versions of the popular game of beer pong, players toss balls into glasses of beer, then chug the brews. For their work, Dawson’s students first needed ping-pong balls to test. They fanned out over campus during homecoming weekend last fall in search of beer pong games.

When they found them, researching students offered players new, clean balls in exchange for those in use. They recorded where the game was played and how long it had been in progress.

The students found the most extra bacteria — 3 million of the tiny organisms — on balls being used in an outdoor beer pong game. A ball being used in a game played on carpet had 200 bacteria on it.

Also in the lab, students put bacteria on ping-pong balls and put them in a glass of beer. They found a high level of transfer of the bacteria from the ball to the beer, Dawson said.

While outbreaks of beer pong illnesses aren’t sweeping the nation, playing the game by the usual rules carries unnecessary risk, Dawson said.

“Ninety percent of bacteria are probably harmless, but by virtue of sheer numbers, you’re taking a chance of getting sick,” he said.

The research didn’t surprise Billy Gains, the owner of BPONG, a group that organizes annual national beer pong tournaments.

After tournaments in Las Vegas, Gains said, some participants have complained about coming down with “pong flu.”

“Maybe there is something there,” Gains said. “But I think it is nothing to do with being sick. I think they are
partying all night and get worn down."

But Gains said there is growing discussion among beer pong players to fill the cups used to catch the balls with water and frequently switch out glasses. At competitions, an opponent is not required to drink a beer when a competitor makes a shot.

"It's about the competition of throwing a ball in a cup, not about the alcohol," Gains said. "We actually threw away a considerable amount of beer at our last tournament."

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