

The Gateway Drink?

by Sarah McCoy



One scientist says kids who gulp energy drinks are more likely to drink, do drugs and hit someone with a hockey stick

Like tobacco products years ago, energy drinks are under scrutiny for not warning users of their potential side effects. Consumers won't die from drinking highly caffeinated beverages (well, maybe), but their contents may not be the best to infiltrate budding bodies and minds.

"I got a Mountain Dew Amp in my hand right now," says 19-year-old Andrew Christian. "Is it bad for me? I'm not sure, but it gives me a lot of energy."

Christian says he's drank energy drinks since he was 16 and he's very much the norm. Energy drinks have become the libation of choice for millions. We see celebrities touting cans of pep wherever they go and even applaud them for drinking these in lieu of alcohol.

According to Kathleen Miller, PhD, an addiction researcher at the University of Buffalo, some studies found that almost 50 percent of U.S. teens use energy drinks. "Parents should discourage the heavy use of energy drinks. Preteens ought to avoid them altogether, and teenagers shouldn't be drinking more than a can a day at most—even that isn't ideal."

What's in Them?

"Caffeine is an addictive drug," says Bruce Goldberger, PhD, director of the William R. Maples Center for Forensic Medicine and director of toxicology at the University of Florida. "Even small doses can have a pleasurable, reinforcing effect on the brain."

All energy drinks contain caffeine. "The ingredients vary from there. Some include taurine, an amino acid. Herbal extracts like guarana, a natural form of caffeine. Milk thistle. Yohimbe, which is basically nature's Viagra. And then, they usually throw in a massive dose of B vitamins. The truth is, we don't know the interactive effects because the ingredient mix hasn't been medically tested," Miller says.

Goldberger notes that children are particularly vulnerable to excessive caffeine. A nationwide caffeine consumption survey conducted on children ages 5 to 18 found that 98 percent consumed caffeine on a weekly basis. Another study concluded that children and adolescents who consumed high amounts of caffeine suffered from caffeine-induced headaches,

insomnia, jitters, heart palpitations, anxiety and increased blood pressure.

The average energy drink is three times as strong as a cup of coffee, but some are 10 times as high. "You probably shouldn't be drinking those without an ambulance standing by!" Miller says. "That may be an exaggeration, but there are actually cases—one was in Colorado—where students were taken to

the hospital after drinking Spike Shooters. This is intense stuff."

Dr. Danielle McCarthy at Northwestern University conducted a study at the Illinois Poison Center. The findings: More than 250 cases of caffeine abuse and some required admission to the intensive care unit.

Toxic Jock

Besides the potential physical dangers, recent research has found that energy drinks are linked to behavioral problems down the road.

Miller authored a report, published in the *Journal of American College Health*, that indicated a strong relationship between the heavy use of energy drinks and risky behavior in athletes, termed "toxic jock" behavior.

Miller says athletes who get wrapped up in an "ego orientation toward sports" are focusing more on beating their opponents and less on being the best they can be. She calls this the "jock identity." That identity can be considered toxic because it is associated with higher odds of things like drinking, sexual risk taking and violence.

"People who drink a lot of energy drinks are also at elevated risk of developing this toxic jock identity," Miller explains. "The first reason risk takers might be drawn to energy drinks is that they

provide a caffeine buzz that can be just as intense as other illicit substances.”

The Appeal

Many blame the marketing of these products. “The energy drink industry has built a comprehensive and highly effective mass marketing campaign that ties together risk taking and energy drinks. Red Bull sponsors extreme sports events, which is harmless, but does encourage a sense of recklessness. And then you’ve got several manufacturers who deliberately use drug-related themes to market their products,” Miller says.

The Food and Drug Administration recently pulled the energy drink Cocaine from the shelves. The company was marketing the beverage as an alternative to the street drug. Now, the drink is still sold but under a different name. Another is Blow Energy Mix, a white powder that is supposed to be mixed with liquid. It comes in a kit containing a mirror and fake credit card for cutting purposes. Both of these are readily available to anyone, any age.

“That kind of marketing sends the message: Drink this stuff and think of yourself as a risk taker and a rebel. It’s indirectly promoting health-compromising behavior,” Miller explains. “Yes, I understand that the industry claims to market to 18- to 25-year-olds. But what appeals to 18- to

How MUCH is too MUCH?

Research from Dr. Bruce Goldberger, director of the William R. Maples Center for Forensic Medicine and director of toxicology at the University of Florida, found some drinks are packing a far bigger punch of caffeine than you might think.

It’s generally considered safe to consume about 300 milligrams of caffeine per day, about what you get from three cups of coffee. A 12-ounce serving of your favorite soft drink contains anywhere

from 29.5 to 45.4 mg of caffeine. But when you get into the energy drinks, the numbers jump dramatically.

An 8.3 ounce can of the popular Red Bull contains 66.7 mg of caffeine, while one 16 oz can of Monster packs a whopping 160. There are several energy drinks that carry as much as 200 mg in as little as an 8 oz serving. Multiply that by a couple of cans a day or during an evening out and you can easily cross the safety threshold.

25-year-olds really, really appeals to younger teens. When you name your product Havoc, Rage, Bawls, Who’s your Daddy or Whoop Ass, teenagers find that appealing.”

Goldberger agrees. “The marketing and use certainly creates the perception among young people that it’s okay to do drugs. Granted, it’s only caffeine, but the perception is there.”

Warning Signs

Canada, Australia and many European countries require energy drinks to have warning labels, similar to the ones found on packs of cigarettes and bottles of booze. The United States has none. The FDA does recommend that soft drinks have a maximum

caffeine concentration of 65 milligrams per 12-ounce serving, but does not regulate the caffeine content of energy drinks. Many of the energy drinks surpass the soft drink limit in as little as 8 ounces.

In addition to watching for physical signs of problems, Miller says parents need to be on the lookout for signs of “toxic jock” behavior.

“If your kid’s a heavy consumer of energy drinks and especially if you know that he or she is also inclined to be a risk taker, those are red flags of elevated risks for other things: substance abuse, physical violence and sexual promiscuity,” Miller says. “Until the FDA does something about it, it’s up to parents to be vigilant.” ☞

From Medicine to MAYHEM

Energy drinks have come a long way from the days when they were promoted for their medicinal qualities.

First marketed as a way to provide a source of energy for people who were sick, Lucozade was introduced in England in 1927. It basically contained glucose syrup and was available at hospitals throughout the United Kingdom. Lucozade was re-branded as an energy drink in 1983. The immensely popular

Red Bull can trace its roots back to a Japanese beverage called Lipovitan that was introduced in the early 1960s. Marketed in brown bottles as a way to alleviate physical and mental fatigue, the prime ingredient of Lipovitan is taurine.

The first energy drink in the U.S. marketed by a major beverage company was Josta, introduced by Pepsi in 1995. Josta was marketed as a “high-energy drink” with guarana and caffeine. It was discontinued in 1999.

