Energy Drinks: What's the Buzz?

By Lisa Flam

Before you crack open a can of Red Bull or Rockstar, you should know what experts say about energy drinks: **Kids should never drink them.**

The high amount of caffeine and other stimulants in those popular drinks can give you a buzz, but they are potentially dangerous to your health. Stimulants are substances that increase energy and alertness.

"The primary substance in energy drinks is a stimulant," explains Dr. Marcie Schneider. "It's an absolute no-no." Schneider is a pediatrician who cowrote a report last year advising kids to steer clear of energy drinks. "Middle school kids don't need caffeine or any other stimulants unless prescribed by a doctor."

The stimulants in the drinks can increase your heart rate, blood pressure, speech rate, motor activity, and attentiveness. They also can cause an irregular heartbeat, and they can keep you up at night, Schneider says. If you already suffer from anxiety, the stimulants can make the condition worse.

"It makes people feel very shaky and jittery, and it may make you feel not well," Schneider says. "You want to be performing when you feel great. You want to be in school feeling at your best, not feeling that you're jittery."

For kids with heart issues or high blood pressure, consuming energy drinks can be very risky. Kids who take stimulant medications for conditions such as attention deficit disorder can also develop serious problems if they have the drinks, Schneider says.

The drinks, which are not regulated by the government, are also worrisome because kids can become addicted to the caffeine. That means your body comes to need it and you don't feel well when you stop having it. It's possible to have

Find fuel from better sources.

Some energy drinks contain the same amount of caffeine as 14 cans of soda.

too much caffeine and get really sick, Schneider says. "That's what emergency rooms are starting to see—kids who are shaking uncontrollably" from having too much of an energy drink, Schneider says.

Instead of beverages with caffeine, Schneider urges kids to drink water or low-fat milk.

Caffeine Connection

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You probably know that coffee and some soft drinks have caffeine. But energy drinks are different because they have caffeine plus other ingredients, such as taurine and guarana. Those ingredients contain caffeine and can have effects similar to those of coffee. They can make the effects of other caffeine ingredients stronger. An energy drink can have several times the amount of caffeine as a soft drink.

"It's like taking coffee and adding all sorts of other stuff that makes that coffee more stimulating to you," Schneider says.

The tricky thing about the beverages is that it can be difficult to tell how much caffeine is in them. That's because on some products, several ingredients are combined and listed together as an "energy blend."

Schneider's report says that some energy drinks have more than 500 milligrams of caffeine, or about the same amount found in 14 cans of cola. Would you ever drink that much Pepsi in one day? (Heads-up: You shouldn't.)

Serious Side Effects

Kids want these drinks because the cans look cool, and kids are looking for an energy boost to study longer or play harder on the field, experts say.

Last summer, Jeremy B., a 10-year-old from Chicago, bought an energy drink just to try it, reported NBC Chicago. According to reports, he was attracted to the colorful bottle on the counter and he never read the warning on the bottle

Caffeine COUNTS

Check out what you are drinking. Remember that you can get the energy you need without overdoing the caffeine. Look for beverages full of vitamins and minerals instead.

DRINK *per 8-ounce serving*	CAFFEINE	SUGARS	CALORIES	TAURINE	GUARANA
Coca-Cola	23 mg*	27 g**	100		
Original Rockstar	80 mg	31 g	140	1,000 mg	25 mg
Coffee	95 mg	0	2		
Milk *fat-free or skim with added vitamin A and D*	0	12 g	83		
Orange juice *chilled, includes from concentrate*	0	21 g	122		
Power Trip the Extreme	110 mg	*not available*	110	1,300 mg	30 mg
NOS Loaded Cherry	130 mg	27 g	110	*amount not specified*	
Powerade Fruit Punch	0 mg	14 g	50		

* milligrams; ** grams

that he was too young to drink the product.

At first he felt energetic and a little sweaty. Then things took a bad turn. Jeremy said that he got a terrible headache and vomited several times.

Energy Drinks and Nutrition

Energy drinks can affect you in several ways. Because the stimulants can make you feel less hungry than you otherwise would, you may be missing out on important nutrients from food that you need to grow and develop. Many of the drinks also have added sugars, which can contribute to obesity and cause tooth decay.

"As a registered dietitian, I do not promote energy drinks as part of a healthy diet," says Amy Jamieson-Petonic, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

While the drinks may provide some nutrients, they are too risky, she says.

Jamieson-Petonic recommends that kids who are looking to feel more energetic and improve their performance get that boost through healthy foods.

She suggests a 100 percent whole-grain bagel with natural peanut butter, fruit with low-fat string cheese, or a smoothie made with fruit and yogurt or low-fat milk.

Sports Drinks

Parents and kids alike are often confused about the difference between stimulant-containing energy drinks and flavorful sports drinks. Sports drinks are intended to replace fluids lost by sweating during exercise.

Water is best for kids participating in routine physical activity such as a gym class. Sports drinks are recommended for high-level athletes who will be vigorously exercising for at least an hour, Schneider says.

"Those kids need sports drinks," she says. "The rest of the kids don't."

Energy drinks are especially bad for athletes because those beverages contain caffeine, which is dehydrating. Dehydration is the opposite of what you want after sweating.

For a post-exercise drink, Jamieson-Petonic says chocolate milk also provides carbohydrates, protein, and fluids lost through exercise.

You need energy for everything in your life. Whatever you do, get your energy from natural sources instead of a caffeinated energy drink. CH