



Energy drink hype!

In a highly competitive world you may be constantly trying to improve on your performance, from working harder academically to pushing yourself further on the sports field. But the need to improve and exceed are often overshadowed by raw talent and achievements in today's society, no matter the cost and dangers of boosting your performance with energy drinks. *By Holly Barnes*

You may want to think twice about drinking an energy drink when you are in need of a 'quick boost' or 'pick-me-up'. Recent studies have shown that most energy drinks distributed around the world contain 'monstrous' ingredients that could be more harmful than you think. More alarmingly over-indulging in these sugary and caffeinated drinks could also cause unwanted effects, such as weight-gain and even an addiction.

Negative effects

With the consumption of energy drinks, also comes the harmful and negative effects that they can cause to your body, mind and physical abilities. The most obvious effect is weight gain according to Cape Town based Educational Psychologist, Andrew Verrijdt. "Energy drinks like Red Bull, Monster and Play have tons of sugar, so drinking a lot of them will give you a whack of empty calories. Of course one could get the sugar-free type but those artificial sweeteners are often bad for you as well," explains Andrew.

Caffeine kick

Most energy drinks contain a combination of different ingredients such as plant-based stimulants (such as guarana), herbs (such as

ginkgo and ginseng) and sugar. The main active ingredient is caffeine, but the amount present will differ in each energy drink. A 340ml can typically contains around 160mg of caffeine but some brands contain as much as 400mg of caffeine per can. Compared to the same size can of Coca Cola which only has 38mg of caffeine, or a regular cup of coffee at around 100mg of caffeine, it is evident that energy drinks have a far higher caffeine content. Weigh-Less dietician, Heidi Lobel states that more than 100mg of caffeine per day is considered unhealthy for teens! Registered Dietician, **Emily Innes** says that caffeine is a dehydrating agent, so if energy drinks are used, and sufficient rehydrating fluid such as water is not consumed, then one can become dehydrated. With this, drinks that contain caffeine should be consumed with caution.

"As for the psychological effects caused by energy drinks, caffeine reliance is very likely and may even lead to a caffeine addiction. If you have a headache that coffee or energy drinks alleviates then it is likely that you are addicted to caffeine. Also, while caffeine does increase alertness in the short-term, once you start getting a regular dose of the stuff your body adapts by producing fewer of its own 'stay awake' chemicals. At that point a hit of caffeine



Heidi warns that energy drinks are full of sugar and contains six to 12 teaspoons of sugar - that's up to 60ml of sugar per can!

won't wake you up any more; instead it will barely make you feel normal," warns Andrew.

Mix up

Heidi also warns of the negative effects that energy drinks can have on your health, and highlights the dangers of mixing them with alcohol. "Popular energy drinks have the potential to cause harm to teens. Reports of dangerous side effects include rapid heartbeat caused by caffeine and alcohol consumption, high blood pressure, weight gain, insomnia and anxiety. More over these threats are heightened when mixed with alcohol," explains Heidi

It's important to remember that you should be controlling what you put into your body and making sure you are aware of the effects certain drinks, like alcohol, can have on your psychological wellbeing. Knowing the impact alcohol can have on your reaction time, speech and thinking, can you imagine what the consequences of mixing alcohol and energy drinks could do to your body? Andrew believes that alcohol is a central-nervous system depressant, while caffeine is a central-nervous system stimulant. "Taking them both together over a long-period of time will likely take a toll on your body," admits Andrew.

Academic improvement? Think again!

Okay so I know energy drinks promote an instant performance and energy boost, but can these drinks really 'help you fly high' so to speak? The answer, according to our expert analyst is NO! "Anyone who is thinking of taking Red Bull or something similar to help with exams (and studying) should know that while caffeine does promote alertness in the short term it can also cause anxiety, which is precisely what you DON'T want in an exam," explains Andrew. Other side effects including a racing heart, light-headedness, headache, restlessness, irritability and an upset stomach are also not conducive to effective learning.

When is too much, too much?

As with anything, too much of something can be bad for your health (and wellbeing). For example, eating cabbage is healthy, but eating five cabbages in one day is a very unhealthy diet. It revolves around the way that your mind perceives food and drinks. If something is stereotyped to be 'healthy' then your mind automatically thinks you could have as much as you want without having to worry about the after effects. But with anything, moderation is and should be a key factor - whether it's the amount of time you spend in front of the TV or playing computer games, to the amount of energy drinks you consume in one day, everything should be done knowing the consequences. "Two to Three energy drinks in a day are unlikely to be too bad for you, but it may well lead to the negative consequences that are listed above and may also lead to addiction, which brings in its own problems," confirms Andrew. On the other hand you also need to put energy drinks into perspective. Just think about the amount of sugar that makes up one can. Heidi warns that energy drinks are full of sugar and contains six to 12 teaspoons of sugar - that's up to 60ml of sugar per can!

Think about all these negative effects the next time you feel like a caffeine kick, sugar high or a quick-fix study session, and consider the dangers and risks. Boosting your performance should be done naturally and not with stereotyped products that target teenagers who are constantly trying to fit into a society where everyone follows popular trends and acceptable behaviours. Remember that you can make your own decisions but be warned that consuming energy drinks without knowing the true health risks could negatively impact your future! ■

NATURAL ALTERNATIVES

- Getting a good night's sleep will leave you well rested and energised for the day ahead
- Exercising boosts your endorphins which can give you energy
- Daily Vitamins can boost your performance (Vital Kids Study Power or Berocca, Bio-plus etc.
- A healthy and balanced eating programme (such as Weigh-Less)