

# Fueled or Fooled: The Dangers of Energy Drinks

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7/17/2008 - TINKER AIR FORCE BASE -- With summer upon us and physical activities increasing people are more likely to grab a quick energy drink to boost their endurance.

Although energy drinks are advertised to give extra energy and are "invigorating or refreshing" -- aimed at the younger teens and young adults -- the slogans don't touch on or specify the long term affects or the "do's and don'ts" of the product.

"We need to make people more aware of some of the health risks involved with the drinks as well as mixing the energy drinks with alcohol or the energy drinks that come pre-mixed," said Tinker's substance abuse counselor at the Medical Group, Mildred Fitch.

Most non-alcoholic energy drinks contain guarana, which has a high caffeine content; taurine; plus various forms of ginseng, maltodextrin, a sweetening, carbonated water, inositol, carnitine, creatine, glucuronolactone and ginkgo biloba. Some contain high levels of sugar, while some brands offer an artificially sweetened version. The central ingredient in most energy drinks is caffeine, the same stimulant found in coffee or tea, often in the form of guarana or yerba mate. The average eight fluid ounce energy drink has about 80 milligrams of caffeine, while 16 fluid ounces drinks containing around 150 milligrams. Drinks containing as much as 400 mg of caffeine have been marketed, according to online resources.

The health risks that are associated with energy drinks can turn out to be fatal. Energy drinks have been known to cause seizures in certain people who suffer from epilepsy due to the "crash" that energy drinks cause after consumption. Caffeine is also known to make people more alert, but can also make their heart beat faster, putting them at risk of health problems.

One country has even banned a very popular energy drink due to a young adult athlete who died after consuming four cans of the energy drink and then played in a basketball game. The death was due to the significant amounts of caffeine that the energy drinks contain.

According to research by several health organizations other health risks and long term effects these popular drinks have on the human body included: electrolyte disturbances, nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure and heart irregularities. These four risks involve improper use of energy drinks.

An example of the improper use of these drinks is a popular trend that includes mixing the drinks with alcohol.

"This combo has the caffeine that is a stimulant and provides energy entwined with the alcohol which is a depressant. The stimulant can make someone feel less intoxicated than he or she really is and as a result the persons drink intake may increase without the person knowing their actual level of sobriety," said Ms. Fitch. "The caffeine itself dehydrates the body and makes the alcohol harder to absorb which makes the toxics twice as lethal."

The Mayo Clinic suggests that to avoid this serious health risk people shouldn't combine alcohol with energy drinks.

A recent problem health specialists and lawmakers are taking notice of is that alcoholic energy drinks are being sold and packaged to look similar to non-alcoholic drinks.

This marketing strategy has youth under 21 purchasing and drinking the alcoholic drinks with adults never knowing the difference.

"My fear is, and we know they are targeting younger people, if mom or dad buy the alcoholic energy drinks for themselves and kids grab them thinking it's just an energy drink, it could have some serious consequences of even fatal results due to the high caffeine and alcohol content. Are people really being aware of the exposure of these drinks?" said Ms. Fitch.

Most alcohol energy drinks come in containers or use names and images similar to those used for non-alcoholic energy drinks. Although underage buyers know the difference between the drinks, not all parents, teachers, law enforcement personnel and retail clerks can easily distinguish between the two different products and can be easily fooled.

According to studies energy drink companies grossed \$3.2 billion in 2006, it is predicted that they will gross \$10 billion yearly by 2010. Public health and safety officials are asking the question; do the earnings of these drink companies pay the price for lives that are lost due to un-education of energy drink side effects?